



ALL'S FAE IN LOVE AND CHOCOLATE:

DAY AND KNIGHT

By

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Chapter One

Anybody with any sense at all knows children have a magic of their own.

The Fae, being essentially magical creatures, found it hard to resist the surge of energy, alertness and personal magic that came from being in the presence of just a few Human children. Which, Glori supposed, was why the false belief in Fae kidnapping infants became so prevalent and so frustratingly hard to stamp out. Then the Industrial Revolution polluted the magical atmosphere by shortening childhood. As the 20th century turned into the 21st, there was less magic to be found out in the erroneously labeled ‘real world’.

What was a Fae supposed to do?

Get hold of Human children and prolong their childhood, of course.

Today, an enterprising Fae who didn’t want to live in the hidden Fae Enclaves--and lose access to the latest movies and TV shows--didn’t have to go through the legal wrangling of adopting a Human child. She could become an elementary school teacher or run a daycare center. With the help of a few judicious cleaning, security, bully-prevention and healing spells, the place practically ran itself, leaving her free to play with the little darlings.

Glori only took two dozen or so children at a time, because that was all she could manage on her own, even with the help of her magic. It was the smallest number she could get away with before someone started asking uncomfortable questions, such as how she controlled all those children without helpers. She sometimes wondered how ordinary daycare teachers managed without magic, even with the help of three or four assistants. Routine was of paramount importance, of course.

Mondays were Dreaming Day. The children loved sitting in the story circle on their personal ‘magic carpets’ and telling about their adventures every weekend. Glori wrote their words on the white boards that covered one wall of the room, to help the children practice their

alphabet. Reading was very important to her.

Then the children painted pictures or made sculptures of clay or paper, or built incredible machines out of blocks and Tinker Toys or Legos or whatever they found in the magically replenished bins of 'scrips and scraps'. They finished up the day making up stories about whatever they had created and performed little plays using the clothes she bought at the Salvation Army store. Sometimes after they left, Glori gave life to the five-legged dogs and the trees with tentacles instead of roots or the houses on stilts and let them run around for a while.

Tuesdays were Field Trip day. She loaded her charges into her van, which always had just enough seats, no matter how many children she loaded into it. She always drove through the park, which brought them out at their destination before anyone could ask, "Are we there yet?" No matter how far away it was. Even in another city. The art museum, the zoo, the natural history museum, the county fair, the health museum, the local newspaper, the candy factory. All of them were within a ten-minute ride. Glori did regret having to mute the psychedelic rainbow that surrounded the van when she warped time and space, but she didn't want to risk the children talking too much about their mode of transportation.

Wednesdays were School Day, to learn colors, letters, numbers and geography. If she slipped a little Fae geography into the lessons, who would know? No one listened to children when they prattled about countries and cities that no one had heard of.

Thursdays were Career Day, when working people came into the daycare in the mornings and talked about their jobs. Then, in the afternoon, the children played at being that particular worker. Policemen and firemen were extremely popular, along with veterinarians, bakers, florists and magicians. Glori was delighted to have her cousin Alexi, who had become a magician in Las Vegas, spend the day teaching the children magic tricks that didn't need any 'real' magic.

The only occupation she never invited to come speak to her children was that of an exterminator. Insects of any kind gave her the collywobbles. She expended twice as much magical energy on the spells to repel all kinds of vermin, from dust mites to cockroaches to rats, as she spent on all her other spells that ran the daycare, combined.

Fridays were Anything Day--when the children could make suggestions and vote on what they wanted to do. Seven times out of ten, they wanted stories in the afternoon, after a hard morning of playing on the playground and coloring pictures and eating their lunches like ladies and gentlemen.

Glori loved storytime the best. Especially when the children asked her to wear her Fairy Princess hat, tall and conical, with lots of gossamer veils. She loved telling them true stories about the Fae, about magic spells that went wrong in funny ways. They loved stories about brave knights and clever princesses who wandered into the land of the Fae and earned the right to stay. She always had at least two children who wanted to sit on her lap while she told the stories. Thanks to her spells, no one argued, though sometimes tears threatened.

And sometimes, when she finished telling an especially involved story about magic, the children made up magic spells of their own. Glori loved watching the streamers of magic forming in the air, powered by their innocent, pure belief. As soon as the children stopped, as soon as they let something distract them or their parents came to take them home, the hazy rainbow streaks of magic faded immediately. Fridays were beautiful and special to her, but sometimes they were painful and sad, because they reminded her that her precious children weren't hers, they weren't even Fae, and when they grew up they would lose almost all their magic.

All in all, however, life was perfect. The only thing that could make her life any better was to have a child of her own, but Glori was still a very young Fae. She had centuries to go until she was old enough to have a baby. Besides, having a baby meant finding a husband, and she had yet to meet a single Fae male worth the trouble of housebreaking him.

Because, to be honest, she knew she wasn't quite housebroken herself. Glori suspected the reason she loved children so much was because she was still very much a child. Thanks to her housecleaning spells, she rarely had to pick up after herself at the end of the day. She snapped her fingers to set the spells in motion, then closed the door on the daycare and walked away. She didn't even lock up. The doors and windows closed and locked themselves. The wastebaskets slid around the room and the trash jumped into them, and then the garbage bags inside the wastebaskets tied themselves and flew to the bin in the storage room. Blocks, dolls and trucks toddled over to wherever they belonged. Mops and brooms went to work on crumbs and sticky spots where juice had spilled during the day.

The sanitation and healing spells went to work to eradicate any germs that had crept in with the children during the day. The vermin repelling spells went to work on any insects or larger pests that had approached the daycare during the day. When Glori walked into her daycare every morning, everything was glistening clean, sanitized and safe for her children. What more

could a young, single, independent Fae girl want out of life?

Her life and her business were perfect for twelve years, four months and three days, until that particular Monday morning, when Glori walked into her daycare center and found it overrun.

Infested.

Filthy.

Disgusting.

Part of it *was* her fault. She had closed the door on the spilled juice, half-eaten apples and scattered cookie crumbs on Friday and walked away. She didn't take care of the paint buckets and modeling clay tubs sitting open, the scattered toys and muddy footprints. She simply expected the spells to do their usual work over the weekend. She hadn't stayed to ensure the spells actually got to work.

"Bother," she muttered, and snapped her fingers to get the spells going. She only had forty-five minutes until the first child arrived.

A *boing* sound, like from a bad cartoon, reverberated through the building. Glori gasped, feeling as if a spring had snapped out of place inside a delicate piece of machinery--and that machinery, strangely, was inside her head.

No! It couldn't be her. Could it? She closed her eyes and did a quick physical and magical inventory. She couldn't find anything wrong. But something was wrong with her magic spells around the daycare center. Her nose and ears told her that much. Was the problem with her, or had someone sabotaged the spells she wove around the building? She did a quick scan of the interweaving of spells that kept the daycare going.

With her eyes set for magic-sight, she saw twisted strands and colors that had gone sour and muddy. Something had definitely gone wrong. She couldn't believe it was sabotage. So what had happened?

Judging from the stink, the mess and the moving carpet of roaches, ants and flies covering walls, floor and ceiling, not just the maintenance spells had failed. The protective shield around her daycare center had imploded.

She held her nose and stared at the dark miasma in the atmosphere and wondered if all the vermin in the neighborhood had actually been *invited* to inhabit the daycare. It happened sometimes, when magic broke down and inverted on itself. Great-Aunt Geffelina had the same

thing happen when she tried to cure a certain prince of chronic hoarseness. Was it her fault she had phrased it as ‘a frog in the throat’, and the poor fellow ended up as a frog?

The general antidote to such malfunctions was, of course, the kiss of a Fae princess or prince. Unfortunately, this being 21st century America, princes were in short supply. As in, non-existent. The closest thing the Fae now had to royalty was a certain noxious male who had had his lecherous eye on Glori since they graduated from diapers, several centuries ago. His name, and he lived down to it, was Theodosius. Glori would rather live without magic than ever look at Theodosius, much less ask him for a kiss.

Besides, time was of the essence. She didn’t have even a few minutes to waste, to ask for help. The second-best cure was at hand, however. Glori always carried four bars of Hershey's Special Dark in her purse to provide energy for heavy-duty, on-the-spot magic. She unwrapped the first bar and started chewing. The first blast of dark chocolate through her system untangled the threads of magic woven around her building. The dark cloud of an imminent headache fled. Glori giggled in the first rush of flavonoids and the magical elements in chocolate that Human scientists hadn’t discovered. She snapped her fingers and the writhing black carpet of vermin scuttled away.

But they didn’t scuttle far enough. Scowling, Glori narrowed her eyes to see into infra-magic, slightly to the left of ultra-violet, and saw every single revolting little body now hid inside the walls of her building. The magic barriers that should have kept the wretched creatures outside now wouldn’t *let* them *out*. Her inner clock was ticking. She didn’t have the time or the chocolate to do extended battle. She compromised by putting the disgusting creatures to sleep. A sharp nod brought bucket, mop, broom and dustpan flying through the room. She used up the last bar of chocolate when she enforced the sanitation spell.

By the time the first mini-van pulled into the parking lot, Glori had the place spotless.

While she greeted her children and exchanged news with the various mothers, fathers and grandparents dropping them off, she pushed and prodded and yanked on the threads, trying to force the magic to let the roaches, ants and flies outside. Surely they would be much happier outside, instead of sleeping the day away inside her walls? By the time Grandpa Tucker dropped off Jerry, Glori had lost every last bit of boost from the dark chocolate--and had to admit defeat. Something was very wrong. Her magic had never acted this way before. It was too well established for something natural to make it go so utterly wonky, without warning.

The problem couldn't be in her, could it? She did another physical inventory and still couldn't detect anything wrong. Then again, if her magic had turned unreliable, how could she be sure? The only thing she could be sure of was that she had to leave the insects sleeping inside the walls and put that particular problem aside to deal with later. Her children were here, the most joyous part of her day had begun, and she wasn't going to let a few wonky spells and some bugs ruin her fun!

She supposed it was a blessing the unwelcome guests didn't include mice. She couldn't stand mice, ever since that accident with her Cousin Bibbety, the pumpkin and the four white mice, while she was in training.

Glori worked herself into a headache for the first time in 146 years, delicately balanced between keeping the children healthy and playing happily, and keeping the roaches, flies and ants asleep inside the walls all day long. She nearly wept when the last mini-van pulled out of the parking lot, and she was alone again with her uncharacteristically uncooperative building. Glori closed the door, locked it, and let go of the guiding strings of magic she had been clenching tight with her mind all day.

There was a near-soundless explosion as the magic released and all the horrid, icky, creepy-crawly things inside her building woke up. Glori shuddered as she imagined that black carpet writhing across the floor of the main room, through the storage room, covering her little cubbyhole kitchen, trying to invade all her plastic bins of fruit and cookies. She could almost see them covering the bookshelves, creeping between the pages, climbing the castle of blocks Tabitha had built before her mother showed up. She swore she could hear the scratching of their legs as they slithered among the stacks of carpet the children used for storytime, the munching of thousands of jaws eating the tempura paint powder. She could see them sliding down the brushes and hear them eating the paste.

Glori bit on her thumb knuckle to stifle a moan. This situation was unbearable. There hadn't been a single insect when she bought the old freestanding dry cleaner building thirteen years ago. No vermin had invaded when she tore up the blacktop and surrounded the building with topsoil and planted grass, trees and flowers. It was a slap against her housekeeping skills and a black blot on her magic that there were bugs here now!

Time to call an exterminator.

Adult Humans did have their uses, after all.

And as Madeline's mother claimed, the number one reason for keeping a man around was to kill bugs--wasn't it? The woman had been married three times, so she ought to know, shouldn't she?

* * * *

Lance Knight loved the full moon. Nothing better than brilliant moonlight to illuminate the creeping, slithering, multi-legged, buzzing, hissing, flying creatures that he hunted. The full moon was only a few nights away, and that always put him in a good mood. So, when he received the distressed call for help at two minutes until quitting time on Monday night, he looked at the knight errant painted on the side of his truck, skewering a giant rat like his ancestors used to skewer dragons, and cheerfully promised to hurry right over.

Yeah, the full moon was his friend. Some people might joke about werewolves and other creatures that came out in the light of the full moon, but he didn't mind. He could handle furry critters without any problem. It was the dark of the moon, the quiet and cold and the subliminal hissing whispers and memories that made him shudder.

Way back in the 13th century, Sir Mortimer, his ancestor, had made the mistake of skewering and *not* killing a Fairy when the pointy-eared freak kidnapped his little sister. The Fairy promptly blasted Sir Mortimer with a curse on him and all his male descendants: to live with vermin and to be vermin until graced with the kiss of a Fairy princess.

At the dark of the moon, Sir Mortimer and all his male descendants turned into ... not rats. That would have been bearable. Big, muscular rats with enormous, sharp teeth had some dignity. At least people had good reason to be afraid of rats.

No, they turned into mice. Cute little Cinderella-type mice, with enormous ears and long whiskers and tails that curled into corkscrews. And fur that peculiar shade of gray that looked almost lavender. It was humiliating, because sometimes Lance swore that the other mice were laughing at him.

That frustration and personal experience did help in the exterminating business. After all, who would be better at finding and destroying vermin than someone who thought like the filthy nuisances, two nights out of every month? And the motivation to wipe out anything that might be laughing at him had driven him to a "Superior" rating with the local BBB, or Better Business Bureau, and half a dozen exterminator associations. Great for business.

It didn't do much good for a guy's love life, though.

Lance considered yet another visit to a few of his regular singles' chat rooms on the Internet as he climbed into his truck and pulled out into Monday evening rush hour traffic. Even successful exterminators and lonely were-mice needed companionship.

The regular harassment visited on him by the ghosts of his irate and moronic ancestors didn't count as company. In Lance's book, their constant badgering and bemoaning of their fate was punishment for a crime he hadn't committed. Yet, anyway.

He was doomed to loneliness if he didn't get rid of the curse, but where could he find a Fairy princess to kiss him? Too bad he couldn't advertise on the Internet for a Fairy princess. This wasn't San Francisco, and he wasn't interested in *that* kind of fairy, thank you very much.

Besides, with the weight of his ancestors' ire resting on his shoulders, he was more likely to do some skewering of his own if he ever ran into a real Fairy, rather than ask for a kiss. Lance knew better than to hope that kind of an encounter would turn out well. He didn't want to find out what could be worse than turning into a disgustingly cute little mouse at the dark of the moon.

Sometimes he wondered if his frustration was the only reason he stayed in the extermination business. It was rather healing to destroy his nightmares and win the eternal gratitude of pretty ladies. Too bad that gratitude never seemed to help them get past the ugly, furred, cheese-nibbling truth. Witness his great-uncle Myron's frustration in finding a ladylove. Which was why Lance was the only living descendant of Sir Mortimer.

Not that he wanted to have children to pass the curse on to, but finding a lady to love him despite everything would free him from at least one small portion of the curse. After all, his mother's love had saved his father from the small print of the curse, so to speak. Where could he find a woman like Mom, in this day and age?

Half an hour later, Lance pulled up in front of Glori Day's Daycare. He was halfway out of his truck when he took a good look at the tree-sheltered building. His jaw dropped so low, he nearly tripped over it.

The place looked like a set from Hansel and Gretel. He hoped those gingerbread people decorating the picket fence, and the gumdrops framing the windows, weren't really sugar-frosted. That would explain part of the problem right there. Would the Health Department have allowed a place like this to open up if the owner was that stupid? Lance shook his head and walked around to the back of the truck to get his basic preliminary examination kit. The woman

who called him sounded way too young to be the owner. Maybe the owner was a wicked witch, complete with warty nose, hunched back, black robes and green complexion? He wouldn't be surprised. After all, several dozen foul-tempered, male chauvinist pig ghosts haunted him. What was an ugly witch or two, compared to that?

His first touch on the candy cane gate sent a pleasant jolt through him that put peppermint in his mouth, warmed his belly and put tingles in his feet and hands. That feeling of power reminded him of the energy that encased him just before he popped--sounding like a soap bubble bursting--into Itty Mouse. The peppermint taste turned sour, and the tingle in his feet turned into an itch to run. What the heck was going on with this place?

"Mr. Knight?" A young woman's voice cut through the jangle of reactions and cleared his head.

Lance took a good look at her and forgot all about his apprehensions. A completely different jolt ran through his anatomy. He had a best buddy in high school who greeted pretty girls with "Hubba hubba." Lance had always thought the guy a jerk when it came to being cool, but the words nearly spilled out of his mouth now.

Golden-red curls hung down her back to her waist, decorated with jewel-winged butterflies--those couldn't be real, could they? Big eyes like emeralds, framed in curly lashes. A full, bow-shaped, cherry-colored mouth. Golden-tanned skin. Lots of golden-tanned skin, revealed by a sleeveless top and knee-length pants, both in a stretchy green material that covered her decently and invited lots of speculation about the sweet, sleek curves they hid. She wore matching green sneakers with sparkly laces and ankle socks with glitter on their lacy cuffs.

She dressed like a little kid, but the heat building up inside Lance told him she was sure enough a big girl. Did she want to come out and play?

"Mr. Knight?" she repeated, and met him at the gate. She held out her hand. "I'm Glori Day. Thank you so much for coming out so late in the day. It's an emergency. This has never happened to me before. It all just sort of exploded into a problem over the weekend. I don't know how I can ever thank you enough for rescuing me."

"That's what knights are for, ma'am," he managed to rumble. Lance prayed he wasn't drooling. He nearly wiped his mouth to make sure, before stretching out his hand to shake hers.

That same jangling, tingling jolt of magic shot through him as her long-fingered hand with its gold glitter-painted fingernails slid into his grip.

Glori stared into his square-cut face, framed in heavy black five o'clock shadow, while her knees turned to cotton candy. She felt his pulse racing under her fingertips, and saw a few tremors race through his body. Funny thing was, her pulse and shivers were ten times worse.

No! This could not be happening! She refused to be attracted to a Human. Especially one named Knight. Every female in her family line had sworn never to have anything to do with a Knight. Ever since that abysmally rude, tin-plated, egotistical, foul-smelling oaf attacked her third cousin Feathedora when she rescued Matilda from her disgusting, lecherous uncle and brought her to live among the Fae.

Nothing in the world could make her....

Glori looked down at her hand, so gently gripped in his huge, calloused, hot paw. She liked his touch. How much magic would it take to whisk him off to her cozy little cottage outside the city, clean him up, and make a nice dinner for them to share ... and then find out if he believed in the Fae?

No! Bad girl! Not the right way to think at all.

Besides, she had a daycare center full of bugs, and bugs were his specialty. Right? She glanced at the knight skewering an enormous rat painted on the side of his truck. Thank goodness there were no mice in her daycare!

"Ah ... if you'll come inside, maybe we can get started?" she managed to say in a reasonable tone of voice. Somehow, Glori slid her hand free of his grip and took a step backwards. She pulled the gate open and gestured for him to walk down the yellow brick walkway to the front door.

"Are you free for dinner, ma'am?"

"Mr. Knight--"

"Call me Lance." He offered up a grin that showed off nice, white teeth and a dimple in his left cheek.

"You might not be free. The bugs could keep you very busy." She turned her back on him in desperation. If she looked into his big, cobalt blue eyes for a few seconds longer, they both might be frozen there until morning. That wouldn't look good for her business, would it?

"No bug ever kept me that busy," he muttered behind her.

Glori closed her eyes as she gripped the door and spelled the lock open. She took a deep breath and braced herself to bolster the magic, altering it just enough to let them in without

letting the bugs out. The door swung open. Every surface in the main room was ... moving.

How could this have happened to her? It had never happened before, in all the years since she bought the building. How could so many bugs have shown up in just one weekend? It wasn't as if her children were messy. No more messy than any ordinary children. Just a few buckets of paint and modeling clay, two spilled glasses of juice, maybe a cup of cookie crumbs spread over a playroom thirty feet by thirty feet. Glori thought about it again, even knowing that considering her problem would create another headache--and she was totally out of chocolate.

No, the only explanation she could come up with was that her magic had decided to take a vacation without warning. And whatever "temporary" magic had come to take its place was working totally backwards!

Lance took one look, braced his arms on the doorframe, and went pale.

"We're gonna need a bigger boat."

The music whispering through the back of his mind, in time with his racing heart, didn't sound like the theme music from "Jaws." But it came close.

Chapter Two

“Get out of here, boy,” a cracked, creaking voice whispered in Lance’s left ear. A chill breeze reeking of rusty iron blew down his collar.

“This is the last place you want to be,” another voice agreed in Lance’s right ear. An aroma of vinegar and ink came with the chill trickle of air that followed the pronouncement.

Lance glanced around the deserted daycare room--deserted, but for a plague’s worth of bugs and him. Miss Glori Day was nowhere to be seen, doing some end-of-the-day paperwork. Thank goodness the children were gone. Had she sent her students home when they arrived this morning, or had she just kept everyone outside on the playground?

Lance imagined the mess that had greeted her when she opened the door this morning. How bad had it been on Friday when she closed up for the weekend, and why hadn’t she called him sooner? There was no way the infestation could have become this bad over one weekend. He couldn’t imagine Miss Glori letting the children come back into this place for at least a week. Maybe more. He felt sorry for her, that was for certain, but not sorry that this mess had given him the chance to meet Miss Glori Day.

Gloria, Gloriosa, Glory-Hallelujah-I-have-seen-the-Promised-Land!

If there was ever a woman who made him want to break the family curse so he could propose marriage and settle down for a honeymoon that lasted about ten years, she was it.

He was glad she wasn’t there in the room with him. Her cute little sparkly tennis shoes and all that gleaming hair and those curves made it hard to concentrate. Almost as hard as the ghostly voices hissing and whispering behind his back. Why did the spirits of his ancestors have to follow him to work, too? Thank goodness some of the younger ghosts--at least, those under two hundred years old--were happy to stay home and watch TV. That still left more than two dozen nasty, sniping, grumbling ghosts and their manifestation phenomena to follow him onto the job and make his work just that much harder.

“Will you shut up and let me do my job?” he growled, and didn’t bother turning around.

Sir Mortimer, Rector Willoughby, Squire Randall and the other Knight family ghosts weren’t visible to anyone but Lance. He wished they were never visible--especially during the dark of the moon--but that was part of the curse, too. He got a preview of what his eternity would look like, trapped with all the men of the Knight clan, unless he found a woman who would love him despite everything. The lucky few, like his father and his great-great-grandfather, had been able to escape the eternal meeting of the Bitter Old Men’s Club, part of the “fine print” of the Fairy’s curse, because of their wives’ love.

If only he could find a Fairy princess to kiss him and break the spell.

His chances of that were about as good as getting a pretty girl like Miss Glori to fall in love with him and put up with the curse. Modern girls simply weren’t made that way.

“Your job is to stay away from Fairies, you nincompoop. And if you can’t stay away from them, drive them out of town,” Rector Willoughby grumbled. His constant presence made Lance wish the family had stayed Catholic instead of turning Anglican for a century. Then he would have been Father Willoughby and never married, and the curse would have ended with him.

“My job is to kill bugs and keep them away from nice people like Miss Glori,” Lance shot back. He almost let his voice rise above a harsh whisper. That just wouldn’t do. He didn’t need her to get scared of him, thinking he talked to himself, and send him away without giving him a chance to win her heart. Or at the very least, a couple dates.

“She’s not nice and she’s not people, you blithering idiot,” Sir Mortimer said. “On three, boys. One–two--“

“She’s a bleeding twinkle-butt Fairy!” the ghosts roared in chorus, with enough force to knock Lance onto his backside. He squashed about a dozen roaches that had been so stunned by the spectral howl they hadn’t fled fast enough.

Lance didn’t care about the mess, but the sudden appearance of Glori from the back office startled him. She couldn’t have heard that howl from the Afterlife, could she? He prayed that she didn’t have any sort of magical talent, or an affinity for ghosts. He didn’t want a girl in touch with Otherness. He wanted a nice, normal girl who could bake apple pies and go to football games with him and yell at him to pick up his socks and put down the toilet seat. And, yes, endure the Family Curse two nights out of every moon.

“Are you okay?”

He loved her voice. Pure music. And that cute little frown of concern made him think she cared about him personally.

Common sense told him Miss Glori looked at all the children in her daycare center that way, when one of them fell down and got a boobo. He wished he could ask her to kiss it and make it better, but he was too much a gentleman to drop his coveralls and ask her to kiss him where it hurt.

Besides, she might take it entirely the wrong way. He didn't want that.

“Fine.”

“Did ... did something just happen outside?” She snorted. “Like a twenty-car pileup?”

That sank his hopes. Glori had heard something. She obviously didn't have much experience with hauntings and curses, if she didn't identify the sound of angry ghosts making like a cheering section at a football game. Which meant she couldn't be a Fairy, right?

Lance felt his heart skip a couple beats at that thought. In all the years he had known the ghostly roundup, they had rarely been right, so he usually ignored anything they told him. But what if, for once, they were right and Miss Glori was a Fairy? That would solve his problems, wouldn't it?

Well, only one problem. That meant he couldn't have anything else to do with her. Lance had to admit he was thinking purely with his anatomy when it came to Miss Glori.

Besides, Fairies didn't live in the real world. His grandfather and father had spent the family fortune trying to track down a Fairy, to break the curse. They had proved that even though the curse remained, Fairies had died out. And that meant Miss Glori was nothing but a pretty girl.

Nothing but? Far from it! The reactions she provoked in him proved there was at least one kind of magic still available in the world.

“I might have let out a yell. Or a curse.” He discreetly looked around, seeking a flicker of light that meant the ghosts were still there. As far as his ears and the absence of that creeping feeling up the back of his neck could tell, they had gone elsewhere. For the moment, at least.

“This place is enough to make a stone saint start screaming,” she agreed. He saw a twinkling in her eyes. “Please, Mr. Knight, are you able to help me? And nothing that'll linger and hurt my children, of course.”

He was about to groan and curse. He should have known she was taken already. Then he

realized she meant the daycare children.

“I’ll do my best, ma’am.”

He cringed, thinking he sounded like an Old West sheriff, but Glori just smiled and turned to go back into her office. Lance sighed and got back to work, checking into all the corners, looking for burrow signs and gnaw holes, cracks in the plaster and the flooring and droppings of all kinds. The more he knew about the nasty little buggers, the better he could fight them. It was more than just his reputation and his pride in doing a job well, now. He wanted to impress Glori Day. He wanted her to be grateful to him. He wanted her so glad to see him she’d go out on a couple dates. Maybe so grateful she’d kiss him before he asked her.

“Get your brains out of your jock strap,” Sheriff Mitchell suddenly snarled, accompanied by the prickling in the hairs on the back of Lance’s neck.

The other ghosts appeared around him, frowning and nodding, seeming all too solid in the shadows of the daycare. He had to get them to leave. Ten years ago wasn’t soon enough. He didn’t want a single flicker or scrap of magic to be anywhere around Glori or her daycare center. It implied things he’d rather forget.

“That girl’s a Fairy,” the sheriff continued, helpfully diverting Lance from depressing thoughts. “Either slice and dice and get back at her kind for what they did to us, or get out of here. For Heaven’s sake, boy, don’t waste time helping her out.”

“There are no more Fairies,” Lance muttered, and turned his back on the cloud of grumps.

At least, he tried to. They had the annoying ability to float around so they always stayed within his range of vision, no matter how he turned, no matter where he went. Sort of like those eyeballs suspended in clear plastic balls, that always looked straight up no matter how fast the balls rolled.

“You wish!” Sir Mortimer cried. “As long as there are Fairies, the curse stays strong.”

That made Lance pause for a moment. Then he shook his head. Glori was pretty and she made his heart--and other parts of his anatomy--sit up and pay attention like no girl had ever done before. She dressed kind of funny, but she spent her day playing with little kids, right? What woman wouldn’t sort of dress and think and act like the rug rats who surrounded her? Besides, he kind of liked how she looked, like a cute little girl.

A cute *big* girl, hiding inside the cheerleader outfit, ready to ambush him.

In his wildest dreams.

“He’s useless,” the squire groaned. “Come on, boys. If he won’t listen to us, why should we make ourselves miserable hanging around this place? It reeks of Fairies and magic.”

Lance bit his lip to keep from saying, ‘Don’t go away mad--just go away.’ The ghosts didn’t appreciate sarcasm, and if they thought leaving would make him happy, they’d hang around, giving him advice and criticizing everything he did, until he was ready to tear his hair out.

There was a sound like dozens of soap bubbles popping--soap bubbles the size of pickup trucks. The light in the daycare center brightened. Lance sighed, welcoming the quiet and the lightening of the atmosphere. He glanced around, just to be sure. Yep, the ghostly roundup was gone. Sometimes family was a bigger pain than anyone could imagine.

The squirming carpet of roaches and ants thickened, as if the presence of the ghosts had kept some intimidated and in hiding. In ten seconds’ time, the number of bugs visibly doubled. Well, at least there was one good use for his miserable dead relatives. Too bad he couldn’t get them to stay in the places that had serious bug problems. That would clear out his personal life, but Heaven forbid his ancestors should finally become useful and make someone happy. Lance glared at the bugs, reminded himself they were his livelihood, and got back to work.

Funny thing, though. This place was spotlessly clean. No signs of damage from the unwanted guests. As if they had all shown up just in the last few days. But from the sheer numbers, these pests had been around for months. Years.

It didn’t make sense. It was as if a curse had been placed. Maybe magic at work?

“No way,” Lance breathed.

Professor Dudley was the most likeable of his ever-present companions. Sometimes when Lance was a boy, the wizened old ghost had told him bedtime stories while the other ghosts were busy pestering his father and trying to drive his mother insane. Dudley had specialized in magic. He had tried to find a way around the curse. There had to be some other cure besides the kiss of a Fairy princess. Logic said so.

Of course, logic said there were no such things as Fairies.

“Nope. Can’t be.” But Lance looked around the room, and his childhood memories conjured up an answer.

The place looked like it had been free of bugs until recently ... because magic had kept

them away, until recently.

The question then became: if Glori had magic, why did it stop working?

“Nah. Can’t be.”

“How’s it going?” Glori asked, emerging from the back office again. She had such a hopeful look on her pretty, elfin face—elfin or Fairy?—that Lance didn’t want to disappoint her.

But still, something started creeping up his back. He felt a chill finger brush across his face, as if ... as if he had seen a ghost that he didn’t recognize.

“It’s going to take a while to come up with an estimate.” He gestured at the rush hour of bugs all around them.

Funny--or not so funny--he just noticed now that all the bugs stayed away from Glori. Like she had an invisible shield around her. Like ... magic?

“Guess we’d better take a rain check on that dinner, huh?” Glori looked a little disappointed. That was good for his ego, at least.

“Well--“

“Honestly, I’d love to spend time with you. There’s just something about you.” Her eyes twinkled and she shrugged, and a delightful little giggle escaped her. “It’s not a pickup line, but honestly, you look ... I don’t know. Familiar? Anyway, I think I’m going to need a good night’s sleep to deal with this in the morning.” She gestured around the room.

“You’re not going to be open, with all this, are you?” He felt horrified and nauseated at the thought of little children exposed to the bugs. He hated being exposed to them, and they were his livelihood.

“Don’t you worry, Mr. Knight. I still have a few tricks up my sleeve. They’re only temporary. I made them work while the children were here today, and I can make them work again in the morning. But I don’t know how long I can keep doing it.” Her smile faltered a little, and Lance saw the struggle for bravery behind her sparkling personality. “My children will be just fine until you come up with a permanent solution.”

* * * *

“A few tricks up her sleeve,” Lance muttered as he stumbled through his front door half an hour later. He shuddered.

This morning, he was a firm believer that Fairies no longer existed. Kind of like woolly mammoths and the dodo bird, they might have existed once upon a time, but they were extinct

now.

This evening, he was firmly convinced he had brushed up against concentrated magic, and it freaked him out. Which was kind of ironic, considering his legacy of ghosts and the Family Curse, and seeing himself in the mirror--while perched precariously on the toothbrush holder--at the dark of the moon.

“A few tricks up her sleeve,” he repeated.

“Still got your brains tangled up in your jock strap?” the sheriff grumbled.

“No. The lad has finally seen the light.” Sir Mortimer floated over from the corner of the ceiling where he and some of the older ghosts retreated when the younger generation indulged in television.

How they had figured out how to turn on the set and change channels, Lance didn't want to know.

“Okay, so she might be a Fairy. She has bug problems like everybody else,” Lance retorted.

“Not like everybody else,” Dudley whispered. He floated over and rested a chill, misty hand on Lance's shoulder. “Sorry, my boy.” Wisps of hair floated like anemone antennae around his bald head that gleamed even in the darkness. His eyes were nearly hidden behind thick, foggy spectacles.

“Yeah, she's got ten times the problem. She obviously doesn't have the magic to help herself.” He stomped through the entryway, down the hall into the kitchen. On a night like this, he needed a couple beers. Fast. Maybe intravenously.

“Don't help her!” the rector shouted after him.

“Have to.” Lance patted his pocket where the sizable deposit check rested. He hadn't quite calculated what it would take--in terms of supplies or time--to clear up Glori's problem, but he had promised to do his best.

Knights always kept their promises, whether they wore spurs or badges or carried enough equipment to be one of the Ghostbusters.

What he wouldn't give for some Ghostbusters right now.

“He took her money,” someone moaned behind him.

“Fat lot of good that does,” the sheriff snarled. “Don't you know anything, boy?”

“Fairy gold,” Dudley said. “It might look real in the moonlight, within the sphere of their

magic, but in the light of day it will be nothing more than a handful of wet leaves.” He shook his head and made tsking noises. “I’m sad to say you disappoint me, Lancelot. I thought I trained you better than that. How could you let her fool you?”

“It’s not Fairy gold. It’s a check, made out on the same bank I use.” Lance twisted open his first beer, took a deep breath, and guzzled the contents in ten seconds flat. He gasped, slammed down the bottle, and reached for his second.

Chapter Three

“Matilda?” Glori gaped, gripping the doorknob of her front door so hard the antique brass protested and started to bend.

“Hello, dear.” Matilda, Regional Coordinator for Fae Emotional, Mental and Physical Health, had made herself at home in Glori’s living room.

Glori’s pet parakeets perched on her shoulders. Almost two dozen jewel-toned butterflies flew dizzy, happy circles above her head. The tall, ethereal, violet-eyed woman wore a simple pair of Capri jeans and a white eyelet shirt. Her outfit, combined with the resident birds, butterflies and plants filling the room, made her seem like an advertisement for a new brand of organic butter or laundry detergent or some such thing that Humans always found so fascinating and essential.

“I hope I got here in time,” the woman continued as she stood up from the nest of pillows on the floor. All the birds and butterflies took wing. They circled Glori three or four times in greeting, then flew off to their respective resting places in the miniature jungle that filled the living room.

“In time?” Glori shook her head. Had she been thinking about Lance so much she had missed something? She sighed, and knew it was the shape of Matilda’s chin, her glossy, ebony hair and the way she stood, firmly planted as if her bare feet could reach through the foundation to the bedrock, that reminded her of Lance.

Everything reminded her of Lance on the short drive home. It was disgusting. And distracting. And she had never felt so ready to fly in her whole life. What was wrong with her?

Nothing is wrong, a giggling part of her insisted. Everything is fantastic. You should have felt this way a long, long time ago.

“Yes,” Matilda said. She held out her hand for Glori’s and led the Fae woman through the jungle, to her sunny, glass-block kitchen. “Sit. I have some news for you.” She sighed and raked her delicate, rainbow-painted fingers through her raven curls. “I hate giving this speech. It was

ten times worse when I gave it to my daughters, and they breezed through it, thanks to being Halflings. How do Human women handle it?" Then she laughed and sank down into the chair next to the stool where Glori had taken her perch. "I keep forgetting—I was Human once."

Glori gasped as Lance finally slid from her thoughts and her mind connected all the pieces. Her spells working backwards at the daycare. Inviting all the bugs from the surrounding neighborhoods to take up residence, instead of keeping them away. The twisting in the threads of the spells woven around her daycare. The fact that she couldn't trust her own self-diagnostic spell. "You know about my spells going wonky?"

"Oh, dear." She slumped a little. "I am too late. How long have you been suffering? Why didn't you call for help?"

"It just happened this morning. Or rather, some time over the weekend." Strange, how she felt better. Not much better, but enough.

Quickly, Glori explained what she had found when she went into her daycare that morning, and the battle she had endured all day to keep the roaches and other assorted pests under control so the children would be safe.

After she explained what she had managed, and that she had hired an exterminator to take care of the problem until her magic went back to normal, Glori fell silent. True, she was exhausted, but she couldn't seem to get her thoughts far from Lance Knight, or keep them away for very long. She sighed, and felt a little resentment toward Matilda for showing up. What if she had convinced Lance to come home for dinner? How could she have explained Matilda's presence? Certainly not as her cousin or sister or roommate. Ordinarily, Glori loved Matilda's visits, which were never frequent enough. With all her responsibilities as Regional Coordinator, she was lucky if she could pop in to see Glori twice a year. Yet for the first time in centuries, Matilda's timing was lousy.

What was she griping about? Matilda was here to help her. Besides, Lance had seemed in such a hurry to leave, despite his suggestions about dinner at the beginning of his visit to the daycare.

Glori sighed. Lance probably remembered he had a date already, or he decided he wanted nothing to do with a woman who could attract that many disgusting creatures. Even an exterminator had to have his limits.

"So, what's wrong with me?" she concluded. "I assume from what you said, all the

problems with my magic are my fault?"

"Not exactly your fault." Matilda shrugged. "Blame heredity. Blame inbreeding and pollution. Blame your mother, who wished for a girl rather than a boy."

"Matilda!" Glori giggled, which was glorious relief from the tension building in her chest just a little while ago.

"It's that time in a woman's life, that's all. Human girls suffer through puberty. Fae women suffer the Need."

"Nooooo!" Glori covered her eyes and leaned back against the wall. "I'm too young to think about mating."

"You're 497 years old, and you've been living outside the Enclaves. That's enough to age and mature any Fae woman or man. Admittedly, surrounding yourself with children should buffer you wonderfully, but it happens to all of us eventually." Matilda sighed and summoned up a brave expression.

Glori would have been convinced, except for that glitter of ... something in her advisor's eye. Matilda did feel sympathy for her, but obviously it hadn't been a traumatic time when *she* faced the Need.

"All right—how did you get through it?" she demanded, and put both feet on the floor, her hands braced on the edge of the kitchen table.

"Oh, my dear, I'm a Changeling, remember? We don't suffer the Need--which, I might add, makes a woman extremely attractive to Fae men. Men, whether Fae or Human, don't like to be hunted down and dragged to the altar. They want to be the hunters, persuading reluctant maidens to promise themselves for eternity—or the next three hundred years, whichever comes first. That's why Fae men used to spend so much time tricking Human girls and bringing them home to the Enclaves—they were more fun than Fae women. More of a challenge. Less likely to expect eternity when a man promises it to them.

"Besides, our men can't get away with anything with us, because we know when they use magic to cast a glamour or put a manikin in their places so they can slip out for a night with the boys. Men like to think they're the hunter, not the hunted. The trick is to make a man think he had to hunt you down, and keep him thinking he has to continue playing hunter, even after he's neatly hog-tied and domesticated." Her mischievous spark died and she sighed. "Living outside the Enclaves is going to make it harder to find you a decent mate. The minute you return,

everyone will know you've come husband-hunting."

"I don't want to marry an Enclave wimp!" burst out of Glori before she could control herself.

"Face it--there aren't that many Fae men to begin with, and most of them live in the Enclave because ... well, Fae women are able to blend in so much better in the outside world. Fae men are like carrier pigeons. They're so busy having fun and playing tricks on Humans, they get caught and clobbered and stripped of their magic before they know it. If only their ears weren't so pointy. They wouldn't stand out so badly and they could talk themselves out of trouble without that little hitch. Fae men are such good talkers...."

"Well, you know what they say--the bigger the points--" Glori clapped her hands over her mouth. Her eyes got big and she blushed so hard she turned red--then violet--then amber, and shot off rainbow-colored sparks. Matilda laughed with her, but all too soon, their laughter faded.

"Face it, dear, you're up against the biological clock, and it's ticking down to an explosion you won't like." Matilda snapped her fingers, and Glori's teakettle floated over to the sink, to fill with water and settle back on her stove. The gas turned on and the lids on the glass tea canisters came open, one after another, bags floating across the room to be sniffed and inspected by Matilda as the two women continued talking.

"Can't I just wait it out? If I stay away from Fae men, won't the Need burn itself out? Kind of like depriving a fire of oxygen, right? I've heard of it happening."

"Some women have managed it, but they lived in Human convents, and it took the better part of three decades. And they aged while they were doing it. Not fun or pretty. And face it, darling, you're not convent material. You love carnivals and sports bars and children too much to go into seclusion. And no TV or movies allowed, if you go the total deprivation route," Matilda added. "Not even pictures of big, strong, sweaty, testosterone-enriched men. Just thinking about heroic exploits and kissing--and worse--will snap your control," she added in a sepulchral voice.

"No *Stargate* or *Dead Zone* or *She Spies* or *MacGyver* reruns? Not even *M*A*S*H* reruns? I can't live without *Galactica!*" Glori thought she'd faint. "But if I avoid all Fae men--"

"It's not always that easy. If a particularly handsome Human showed any sexual interest in you whatsoever on a particularly bad day--that's it. He's tied up, nice and neat, and happy about it, thank goodness. But you're bound to a Human you will probably grow tired of because you didn't *choose* him voluntarily. You'll be trapped by hormones. Hooked and landed. And

Humans--especially the males--being as fertile as they are, you'll have a Halfling bun in the oven before you know it."

"Halflings aren't so bad. I adore all your sons and daughters. Not a bum in the bunch."

"I was smart enough to let Anselmo trap me." Matilda smirked. "He still thinks he has to work to keep me happy and protect me from other men interested in me. Commitment and a little spice are important in a happy marriage, and it reflects in the children. Breeding is everything."

"That's just it--I don't want to breed!" A horrid thought struck her hard enough to knock the breath out of her. "Oh no. Lance!"

Or maybe it wasn't such a horrid thought at that....

* * * *

Usually, Mortimer harassed Lance if he had more than two beers in a night. Tonight, however, the ghostly knight badgered the other spirits into helping supply Lance with ... spirits. He was so sunk in thought, he didn't even notice until his second glass that his beer tasted a lot like whiskey.

Lance didn't keep whiskey in the house.

"Where did you get--no, I don't want to know." Lance stomped into the kitchen and started to pour his glass into the sink. Then he thought better of it. The higher the alcohol level rose in his blood, the easier it was to float over the logic barriers in his brain.

Even a man who lived with ghosts and turned into a teensy little cartoon-cute mouse at the dark of the moon had a hard time accepting the concept of a real, live Fairy in this day and age.

Especially one who ran a daycare center and had a killer bug problem.

Especially one who was pure eye candy that had nothing to do with the Good Ship Lollipop.

What if he had asked Glori out tonight after all? Would he have his kiss and be free of the curse by now?

"She has to be a princess, dope," he growled, and slammed the glass down so hard it cracked. Lance muffled a curse and dumped the whiskey out into the sink and the glass into the trash, before he accidentally slit his wrist. Now was not the time to join the ghostly roundup.

"What if she is a Fairy princess?" Dudley asked, floating down through the ceiling to join him just above the sink. "If you force her to kiss you, violence could negate the efficacy of the

magic.”

“What if she doesn’t know she’s a Fairy?” Lance mused. “What if she’s a Halfling and she doesn’t know what she is? Who ever heard of a Fairy princess running a daycare? Does the magic work if she doesn’t know what she is? Does she have to wish it, for me to be healed and the curse broken? What if she thinks I’m crazy when I tell her?”

The thought of Glori laughing at him, or running away shrieking in terror, sent a pain through him that had nothing to do with his burning stomach, his missed dinner, or the purely hormonal need to see her again.

* * * *

“What about birth control?” Glori blurted.

Matilda let out a yelp, startled off the step-stool she perched on to dig out the last bottle of chocolate syrup in Glori’s highest cupboard. Her emergency stash, put aside for true crisis moments. Matilda landed with a soft thump on both feet, clutching the bottle to her chest, and glared at the Fae woman.

“The Need is more emotional and physical than biological, right? Getting pregnant doesn’t turn it off, and neither does falling in love, right?” Glori hurried on, in between bites of her triple chocolate supreme brownie sundae. “If I just get some really good birth control--and make sure he uses his own--and just have a really hot, sweaty....” Her face blazed hot, rippling through the usual color changes at near-blinding speed as her words trailed off.

Matilda’s glare softened to understanding. And, what was more unbearable, pity. She sat down opposite Glori, dumped her untouched sundae into Glori’s mixing bowl and sprayed extra whipped cream on top for good measure.

“Sometimes, yes, a torrid affair does serve to flip the ‘off’ switch on the Need. So to speak. But do you really want to risk it, in this day and age? Human males can be just as oblivious and brutal nowadays as they were when I was a child. You go into it expecting a week or two of mind-blowing sex. He goes into it expecting the same. No strings attached. What if he’s a caveman and decides he’s not letting you flutter away at the end of the affair? What if he’s into something really kinky? I’m sorry, dear, but you are a virgin, emotionally and physically. You’d be surprised what sort of things men think are attractive, and caught in the throes of Need, you’ll do anything he asks. Things you’ll be ashamed of once you come to your senses. But all that aside, despite your best intentions ... somebody’s heart will engage when you most need it

to stay disengaged. One of you will come out at the other end with a broken heart.”

“Or a really bad case of the clap,” Glori muttered. She tried to summon up a smile. “The thing is ... Lance--”

“You’re already attracted to a Human?”

Glori dropped her head down on the table and burst into tears. Or, she tried to. It was hard to wail with her face in her mixing bowl, full of ice cream, brownies and chocolate syrup. And Matilda couldn’t help giggling. After all, she had whipped cream in her ears.

She conjured a mirror from her dressing table, and a few spurts of teary giggles escaped her as she wiped her face clean. The whole idiocy of her situation and her appearance killed the need for a good, long downpour of tears. But she couldn’t really, fully laugh. Not now.

She honestly liked Lance. And she didn’t like the horrid suspicion that she only liked him because he was the first male to approach her with the right resonance in nearly 200 years.

Why a Human?

* * * *

“Why a Fairy?” Lance muttered, and stepped outside to stare up at the full moon. He couldn’t help wondering what Glori was doing right now in the light of the full moon. Did she have wings? Did she dance? Did she fly? Was she like that crazy chick he dated in college, who claimed she was a werewolf and could only hold off the curse if she did IT at the full moon?

Wrong mental track to follow. Lance’s head ached from too much thinking. His stomach ached from too much booze and not enough dinner. He didn’t need other parts of his anatomy chiming in with problems and feeling depressed and neglected.

To make matters worse, some of Dudley’s research on Fairies through the centuries had yielded some pretty erotic artwork and kinky literature. Lance’s well-lubricated brain started opening every single memory file, so to speak.

What did Glori look like under those childish clothes? More importantly, what did she look like in the shower and did she need someone to scrub her back?

“I need a long, cold shower,” Lance mumbled, and staggered inside to find the bathroom.

Chapter Four

“The way I see it, you only have two options.” Matilda frowned and swayed a little.

Matilda was the only non-Fae that Glori knew who could get smashed on diet cherry cola. It was a combination of all the magic she had absorbed in the last four centuries, the caffeine, and aspartame. And the carbonation. Glori privately believed it was the carbonation more than anything else. After she washed off her ice cream brownie facial, she had pulled out the floor pillows and her emergency twelve-pack and settled down for an evening of drowning her sorrows. It had actually worked, until Matilda started talking about the problem again.

Why was it, Glori wondered, every time she thought of Lance, her happy little buzz went flat?

“Two options,” Matilda repeated. “Have a really torrid affair, and hope your magic is strong enough to keep this Human from remembering anything when you get it all out of your system. Which could be a problem if it lasts more than a year or two. A problem for him, not for you,” she added with a lopsided leer. “Or, you resign yourself to moving to an Enclave. Take a Fae male as your long-term partner with the understanding that once the hormones settle down, you don’t need to see each other. Except for visitation with the kiddies. If there are any. Depends on how long the Need lasts.” She hiccupped softly.

“But what about Lance?” Glori whispered. “I really, really like him. I don’t think I could ever look at him again, if I’m tied to someone else. I’d feel really ... weird.”

Not to mention how totally weird it would feel to live underground again. That was part of why she avoided the Enclaves. With their warped time fields, there was no such thing as day and night. The ratio in most Enclaves was one to twenty; one year inside the protective magic field was equal to twenty of ‘real time.’ It was enormously helpful in getting through recessions and wars, but it played holy havoc with keeping up with a favorite author or TV shows. Even if she could endure living underground, with a man who didn’t make her toes tingle, Glori didn’t think she could live without her TV shows. Even if she managed to get everything on DVD, it

just wouldn't be the same.

“Oh. That is a problem.” Matilda shook her head. A sprinkle of silver sparkles swirled around her and she discreetly burped, going instantly sober. “Well, maybe I should check out this Lance of yours and help you figure out how to handle him. Metaphorically speaking, of course. I have a strict hands-off policy when it comes to other women's lust interests. Besides,” she added with a satisfied smirk, “Anselmo is still a jealous brute when it comes to handsome Humans. You need a man who trusts *you*, but still gets jealous. That's the secret to keeping the spark in your marriage.”

“I don't want to get married!” Glori wailed.

But inside, a quiet little voice added: *Unless it's Lance.*

Now, that was frightening. Was she caught in the magic warp field of Need, or was it another kind of magic altogether?

* * * *

The next day dawned much too soon and far too brightly for Glori--and she only had a small chocolate and cola hangover to contend with. The problem was that she hadn't slept well, her mind filled with images of ambushing Lance. And if she wasn't tricking him into signing his life away to be with her, totally hoodwinked by the unwitting magic brought on by Need, then he was trapping her, taking advantage of her brain working at one-quarter power.

The problem was that--doggone it--she liked the humiliating situations she got into, in her dreams, when Fae hormones went on overdrive.

So, even though she went to work early specifically to meet Lance and get a little exterminating in and activate her straining, temporary measures of making the bugs sleep before the children arrived, she was not at all happy to see him.

At least, her brain and bloodshot eyes weren't.

Her imagination and that funny twisting feeling in her tummy were ecstatic.

“Hi, Glori.” He perched on the bumper of his truck, gulping the biggest cup of take-out coffee she had ever seen, and didn't seem too eager to meet her gaze.

Yesterday, they had all but fallen into each other's eyes a few times. Was the honeymoon over before it had begun?

Lance had also gotten past his need to call her ‘Miss Glori.’ That was a bad sign, too.

“Well, shall we see what damage our little friends did overnight?” she asked, trying to

smile. “You’re going to be rich by the time you see the last of this place.” She turned to lead the way through the gate.

“Maybe not.” Lance moved amazingly fast, stretching out his big, warm hand and catching hold of her arm, stopping her as if he’d glued her feet to the ground.

Maybe her feet were melting, because something had certainly turned hot and sticky deep inside her belly. Glori wobbled a little, her knees suddenly weak. Why did Human men have to smell so good, first thing in the morning? She adored the scent of pressed cotton and leather boots, Irish Spring, and something piney--probably Avon. She looked into his big, dark blue eyes and harps started playing.

Now what had she been complaining about last night? She must have been an idiot. In fact, maybe she’d just put a ‘closed’ sign on the window and take Lance home. Wouldn’t Matilda get a kick--

Matilda. Her Regional Coordinator.

Matilda had warned her this would happen, the longer she resisted and tried to ignore the wonky things happening in her brain and body, thanks to ‘that time’ in her life.

“Glori?” Lance dropped his cup, covered her hand with his other hand and squeezed. The concern in his eyes nearly undid her brain again. “You okay?”

“Fine. Just--I had a rough night last night.” She reluctantly pulled her hand free and stepped back to get a breath of air, minus the wonderful aroma of Lance. The sooner she snarfed the six dark chocolate bars in her purse to straighten out her brain and magic, the better off she would be.

“Tell me about it,” he muttered. He bent to toss his empty paper cup into the truck, then stepped up onto the sidewalk with her. “I have a business proposition to make.”

For a moment, all Glori heard was ‘proposition,’ and she nearly bit her tongue to keep from shrieking something along the lines of ‘Yeeee-haw!’

“Proposition?” She choked despite her best efforts at dignity and control. *Oh, please, don’t let me blush in front of him. I could never explain changing colors!*

“A trade, I guess you’d call it. You’ve got something I want--and I’ve definitely got something you want,” he continued.

Oh, boy, have you got what I want. No--not want. Need! The dratted Need. It’s not really me--it’s hormones. Get control of yourself, girl. She took long, slow, deep breaths to calm

herself. Her body needed Lance, but she didn't really want him. It wouldn't work. He was a down-to-earth guy who killed bugs for a living, and she had just hit adolescence.

It wouldn't work.

So why did it hurt so bad to remind herself of that?

"Are you listening?" Lance stepped closer, which didn't help her ability to concentrate.

"Sorry. I had a really bad night last night and it's affecting ... everything," she finished on a sigh. "What do you think I can help you with?"

Please, please, need a date for your high school reunion--on a cruise--for a week!

"I need to find a Fairy princess."

"Don't we all. I don't know what it is about--excuse me?" She took a staggering step backwards, which put her at the perfect angle to get the rising sun in her bloodshot eyes. Glori stepped closer to him to block the light. "Did you say--?"

"Fairy princess. Yeah. And don't send me to San Francisco. I've already thought about..." He sighed. "I know you're a Fairy."

"We call ourselves Fae." All those hot, gooey feelings cooled and congealed. Like stepping into a deep-freeze.

"Whatever." He shrugged.

"It's not whatever. How'd you like it if we referred to you as smelly mortals all the time rather than Humans? At least it gives you the benefit of the doubt!"

How could she ever have thought it would work with him? He was prejudiced against her kind and misinformed, thanks to a childhood full of propaganda handed out by the Magic Folks Defamation League. Glori loathed those malcontents among the magic-blooded who wanted to be ignored, underestimated and basically considered 'mythical' so they could roam the world and do their dirtiest tricks without getting suspected or blamed. They figured--rightly--that if Humans laughed at the very thought of their existence, nobody would believe in them.

People like the MFDL gave Fae and other magic-blooded folk a bad name. They needed to be locked up, but where did the High Council on Magic draw the line between innocent pranks, mischief, paybacks and nasty revenge? Sometimes Glori admired vigilante types. Where were Charles Bronson and Bruce Willis when she really needed them? And Arnold whatever-his-name-is? She could use some massive termination to make her life a little easier.

That didn't solve her problem with Lance, though.

Lance gaped at her for two seconds, stunned as much as she was by the bitter spew. His eyes crinkled up and he snorted, then he grinned and belted out a few good chuckles that made him shake and gave her a good view, at close range, of his washboard abs under that clingy T-shirt half-hidden by his unbuttoned flannel shirt. She most certainly did love the smell of warm male in flannel.

Glori was lost again in Hormone La-La-Land. She didn't mind at all, as long as Lance found her.

But would he come looking, now that he knew she was Fae?

"Why do you need a princess?" she asked on a sigh. It was getting to be a very long day, and it was barely seven a.m.

"My ancestors were put under a curse, and I need the kiss of a Fairy princess to break it."

"And what does that have to do with me?" She held her breath, unsure if she would laugh or cry, swoon or die of frustration if Lance told her he thought she was a princess. He was in for a rude surprise, and she didn't like disappointing him.

Or was it just her hormones that didn't want to disappoint him?

"Find me a Fairy princess to break my curse, and you get extermination for life for this place." He gestured at the daycare building behind her and winced, as if he could see the floor, walls, ceiling and the very air thick and black, writhing with the pests that had probably multiplied overnight.

"If I could get hold of a *Fae* princess, I'd have her take care of this problem. My magic is going all wonky, or this never would have happened in the first place." She squeezed her eyes tight shut, fighting a headache and an unreasonable need to burst into tears. She definitely didn't want Lance to see her dripping violet and rose tears when she got really emotionally wrung out. Just because he knew she was Fae didn't mean he could take all the surprises dumped on him all at once.

Chapter Five

“So you can’t help me?” Lance asked in a quiet voice that turned off the need for tears and turned on a crushing need to put her arms around him and comfort him.

“I wish I could. Really. Why should you suffer a curse for something some idiot in history committed?”

“Exactly!” He gave her a lopsided grin. “Can you point me in the right direction, at least? And why can’t you find one?”

“First off, you’d need a time machine....” Glori sighed and gestured for him to follow her back behind the daycare, through the gate into the play yard. They sat down on one of the miniature picnic tables. The plastic creaked under their combined weight, but Glori knew it wouldn’t break. At least that much of her magic was still viable, despite the havoc the Need was currently wreaking on her entire life. Just because her hormones were out of whack, why did her magic have to suffer?

“It’s a matter of modernization and egalitarianism.” She giggled when he gave her a ‘huh?’ look. “We don’t have royalty anymore.”

“Why not? I mean, it’s in all the storybooks--“

“Don’t get me started on the stupid propaganda you Humans have passed down through the centuries. Some of it is our fault, I’ll admit, to get you sidetracked so you couldn’t find us so easily, but....” Glori sighed. She didn’t need this. Lance didn’t need this. “We don’t have royalty. We take turns handling all the administrative functions required by our hidden communities. And the office is never handed down, parent to child, so there’s no hereditary power, so there’s no royalty, so there’s no princess to kiss your booboo and make the curse go away. Sorry.”

“But technically, the leader is the queen or king, right?”

“Technically.” For a moment, hope welled up. Then she remembered the current administrator--king, and Glori felt worse, for Lance and for herself.

Theodosius was a slimy character who should have turned himself into a slug centuries

ago. He was the last person she'd ask for a favor, mostly because he'd been after her bottom since they graduated from the nursery. He was the reason she left her home Enclave in the first place, risking the utter strangeness of the Human-dominated world for the sake of freedom from a male who thought of sex before he was potty-trained. If Theodosius knew she had finally gone into Need, he would be here and using every trick in and out of the book to get her into bed. Glori had no hope of being able to resist him--look how she was reacting to Lance, and he was only being nice to her. Once she and Theodosius had sex, she'd be trapped, tied to him forever!

How he got through all the screening processes and interviews and mental/emotional balance tests to attain his current position of power was a tribute to red tape, even among the Fae.

Technically, he was royalty, and his kiss could cure. But there was a reason why Fae magic resided most strongly in the distaff side of the magic wand.

The thought of Theodosius trying to plant one on Lance made her just slightly sicker than she was feeling already. Theo would enjoy it, the malodorous creep!

"Our leader is a man right now."

"When does someone new take over? Someone female?"

"In about four years." She bit her lip to keep from explaining that they were Enclave years, not Human, real-time years. Lance wouldn't like that.

"Any chance it'll be your turn?"

Oh, that soft little hopeful smile could turn a woman to melted marshmallow in half a heartbeat!

"It won't be my turn for about sixty more years. Sorry," she whispered.

Why was she whispering?

Probably because she was about two inches away from him and Lance looked like a huge magnet had gotten hold of him and was yanking him closer to her every second. And he didn't look like he was in any pain at all.

"That's the last thing I want to think about right now. Leadership duty is a pain in--" She blushed, but managed to stop herself in time before she turned colors. "It's a pain in places I won't mention in my daycare, thank you very much."

Lance laughed, but it wasn't a nice laugh. He sounded angry. Disappointed.

"Sorry, but your bureaucracy really doesn't mean toad squat to me. My problem is a little bigger. And like you admitted, I sure don't deserve it!"

“No, you don’t.” She slid off the picnic table and scurried away a few steps. If she wasn’t careful, she’d offer to kiss him and try to make today better, even if she couldn’t fix his life. And that would lead to ... well, to problems that could ruin her next few decades as well as drive away all her customers at the daycare if anyone caught her and Lance in a clinch. Or worse.

Before she could try to wrench the conversation back to more immediate problems, Lance stood and gestured at her building and grumbled something about getting to work. Glori felt like wilted lettuce as she followed him to the back door and spelled the lock open. Her children were about to show up. Time to brace herself, gather up the shredded remains of her magic and try to get through the day.

Lance didn’t deserve his problems any more than she deserved hers. Maybe they could still help each other ... but could she do it without her raging hormones getting in the way?

“I’ll ask around,” she said, and flicked her wrist, making the lock open and the door swing out. “My Regional Coordinator is here, and she has more access to records than I do. Maybe we do have some hereditary royalty, and they just keep a low profile. You know, kind of like the Tsar’s relatives did when they got out during the Revolution?”

That hadn’t been a fun time for the Fae. The Bolsheviks liked playing with explosives, and protecting the Enclaves from Human demolitions used up a lot of magic.

Lance’s hopeful grin was worth every headache she anticipated waiting for her.

Maybe she could get a couple kisses to tide her over, kind of like aspirin when she really needed a nerve block? Nothing long-term, and certainly nothing with strings attached, but aspirin always helped in every situation, right? Even if it was a gaping wound, aspirin wouldn’t hurt. Would it?

* * * *

Lance emptied several spray canisters that looked like they were better suited to Army defoliation exercises, injecting the foundation of the building from the outside, and then drilled little holes in the walls along the baseboards. That, combined with Glori’s dark chocolate-buffered magic, put the bugs into a coma that would last as long as there was daylight. She ate a Nestlé’s Crunch for a booster and added another spell to keep the stink of the chemicals from wafting into the building. He hurried, and she wanted to kiss him in pure gratitude for being careful of her reputation. Glori could only imagine the questions and rumors that would start up if anyone saw his knight-skewering-a-rat truck parked outside her daycare.

Yes, she wanted to kiss him, but Lance seemed distracted, and after all the magic she had wrung out, her reserves and self-control were pretty low. She settled for asking him to come back at the end of the day when they could talk, he could meet Matilda, and they could try to find a solution. For both of them.

Matilda had promised to come to the daycare at the end of the day to inspect her spells and see if she could do something to bolster them. The daycare was so infused with Glori's magic in particular, it would be hard for someone else to come along and get involved with the thick layer of personalized magic. If anyone could do it, Matilda could. That was why she was a Regional Coordinator.

"Thank goodness I'm a Changeling. It keeps me firmly out of the contention for Enclave Administrator," Matilda admitted that afternoon, when Glori told her about Lance's questions and her nauseous thoughts about Theodosius.

She walked around the outside of the daycare, nudging a teeter-totter with her foot, flicking a few sparkles of magic at the swings so they creaked and swung without a touch of wind, frowning and 'humming' as she stared at the foundation of the building.

"Does this Lance have any magic in his blood? I feel something enhancing the purely Human chemistry involved."

"His ancestors have been living under a curse, and it's come down to him. That probably builds up the magic in the blood," Glori offered. It was just another sign of how wonky her magic had gone, thanks to the Need, that she couldn't sense other magic at work, even injected into the foundations of her beloved building.

"What sort of curse?"

"We didn't get that far. He needs a Fae princess to break the curse and if I find him one, he'll give me extermination for free for life. If my magic is going to be so unreliable ... I'm going to need all the help I can get." She sighed and sank down on the plastic picnic table again. Funny, but just remembering how she had sat there with Lance that morning made her feel warm and protected. She could almost smell freshly ironed cotton and Irish Spring. Glori looked around, and there was Lance, striding through the gate into the playground.

The flying, tingly, warm, bubbly feeling she got just looking at him went a long way toward making the Need bearable.

"Matilda?" she called.

She had to distract herself before she performed a flying tackle on Lance. He didn't need to see Glori lose all control, sprout dragonfly wings fifteen feet wide and dive-bomb him. At least, not now. Maybe when they knew each other better?

"Matilda?" she called again, her voice cracking. "He's here." Glori got up and darted around the side of the building, after waving for Lance to stay there.

"Well, there's something to be said for a first crush." Matilda's smile was crooked with sympathy and that nasty sense of humor that nobody could resist. "Darling, you should see yourself. All sparkling and heightened color and ... well, about two inches off the ground."

Glori looked down and gulped. Sure enough, she could see a gap between her sneakers and the child-battered grass. She stretched with her toes, found the ground again, and firmly anchored herself to the laws of gravity.

"You're beautiful," Matilda whispered. She slid an arm around Glori's shoulders, turned her around, and led her back the way she had come. "Even without all your magic, you'd be hard for a normal man to resist, much less--" She stopped short, abruptly enough Glori walked out of her support. Matilda gulped, choked, and went deathly pale.

"Mortimer?" she shrieked.

Chapter Six

“Uh—no ... the name’s Lance. Lance Knight.” Lance looked at Glori, eyes wide and begging an explanation. She couldn’t give him one. He held out his hand. “How are you? Are you Glori’s boss? She said maybe you could help.”

“Well....” Matilda got her color back. She swallowed hard a few times, nodded, and staggered over to the picnic table to sit down. “I can give you some answers, at the very least.”

“About what?” Glori asked. She looked at Lance, who shrugged, just as lost as she was.

Matilda shook her head, waved her hands in front of her, and conjured up a scry-globe. It looked like a gigantic soap bubble, one foot in diameter, but the iridescent rainbow control pad didn’t flicker and slide across the surface. With a snap of her fingers, the globe shot straight at Lance. He ducked, but couldn’t move fast enough. In a moment, it enveloped him, expanding and shimmering all around him, then yanking free before he could react with anything more than his jaw dropping.

“What was that about?” he demanded as the globe flew back to Matilda and balanced in her outstretched hands, much smaller again.

“Answers. Collecting data. Much easier on the subject than putting you through twenty questions, don’t you think?” She didn’t even look at him as she studied the silver script that scrolled across the surface of her globe.

“Sorry,” Glori whispered, as she stepped over to stand with Lance. It wouldn’t do her any good to try to read over Matilda’s shoulder, so why bother?

“What’s wrong with her?” Lance asked, softening his tone.

“Family reunions are always difficult when you aren’t expecting them,” Matilda said. Her scry-globe vanished with an audible *pop*. She dusted her hands against each other and stood up. “Where is Mortimer? You’re his spitting image, you know. At least, I hope you don’t spit like he used to. It was disgusting how he....” She sighed. “You are haunted by Mortimer’s ghost, aren’t you?”

“Yeah, but how did you know?” His mouth fell open. “Are you the Fairy who zapped him with the curse in the first place?”

“No--I’m Mortimer’s little sister who almost drowned because he was always an arrogant, bull-headed, oblivious....” Matilda shook her head. “Maybe we should go someplace a little more private to talk.”

“Mortimer’s sister? The one who got kidnapped by Fairies?” Lance’s voice rose half an octave and cracked.

“I was not kidnapped, and if that oaf had ever bothered to listen, you wouldn’t be in this mess today.” Matilda snapped her fingers. Colors flashed around them, and a moment later they stood in Glori’s kitchen. “We’re going to need more than chocolate, dear.”

Glori agreed. She snatched up her phone and started calling all her favorite carry-out restaurants that delivered.

“You ... sit.” She flicked her fingers and the chair bumped out from the end of the table. Lance glanced once at Glori before obeying.

They sat in silence while Glori made her calls. By the time she finished, Matilda and Lance both looked impressed with the amount and varieties of food she had ordered.

“How are you going to pay for all that?” Lance muttered.

“Daycare pays extremely well when magic takes care of most of the basic necessities.” A bit of pique flared and slid out her lips before she could stop herself. “Did you think we paid in false gold, just conjuring up an illusion of riches from trash?”

“Sorry,” he muttered, and studied his crossed arms resting on the table.

“Well, it’s nice to see this generation has learned some manners and to admit when they’re wrong,” Matilda said.

Or rather, she smirked. Glori breathed a sigh of relief to see her supervisor and friend had returned to her normal sense of balance and humor. Seeing Matilda unbalanced and shocked was enough to make the world spin off its axis.

“All right, let’s get the unpleasant explanations out of the way while we’re waiting for the food.” Matilda sighed and leaned back, leaving her hands resting palms down on the edge of the table. “Did Mortimer ever tell you about our Uncle Maximilian?”

“When he isn’t raging about the nasty....” Lance clamped his mouth shut, nodded, swallowed and tried to smile.

“Tell?” Glori thought she felt the Earth tip again. “Is your swine brother still alive? Is that part of the curse, too?”

“No, the curse is that all the ghosts who didn’t find true love haunt the next generation and make it really hard to find a decent girl.” He rolled his eyes. “Two topics of conversation with Sir Mortimer. The other one is how his uncle--your uncle,” he corrected himself, nodding at Matilda, “stole his inheritance, his castle, the woman he wanted to marry, and made Mortimer seriously consider becoming a rogue knight to stay alive.”

“He never told you about Uncle Maximilian’s taste for little girls?” Matilda asked quietly.

Glori gasped--then she understood. Three years ago, she had almost been hauled before the Review Board for violation of the Invisibility Act: excessive use of magic in an aggressive and predatory fashion, thereby risking the exposure of Fae presence among Humans.

She had devoted a lion’s share of her free time to tracking down and tormenting the non-custodial father of one of her girls, after she discovered why he was allowed no contact with his daughter. Child molesters, rapists, pornographers and drug dealers all belonged in the same torment reserved for the Magic Folk Defamation League.

Matilda had championed Glori during her hearing with the Review Board. Now Glori understood why.

“No,” Lance said slowly. “He never did. Knowing Mortimer, I bet he never guessed.”

“Oh, my, some of your ancestors must have married extremely intelligent women and improved the breed. He’s a keeper, darling.” Matilda winked at Glori. “You’re exactly right. Mortimer never knew what Uncle Maximilian meant when he said he loved me.” She shuddered delicately. “Fortunately, my nurse was a Valkyrie and she never left me alone for a minute. Up until Uncle Maximilian decided I was too old for a nurse and sent her off to marry his chief pig herder. I climbed out my window that first night I was alone and he came after me.” She snorted. “He tried climbing down the rope I made with my bed curtains and sheets. It broke under him. He was laid up for nearly four months with a broken back before he died. But that has nothing at all to do with Mortimer, does it?”

“Uh, no.” Lance flicked a questioning glance to Glori. She shook her head. She had heard some of this story, but not those particular details.

“It turns out, I had some predilection for magic already in my blood. Fae men have a

tendency to ... sow their wild oats, so to speak. That's the only way Changelings can become Changelings, of course. Somewhere in our history is a Halfling or two. It wouldn't do a spot of good to adopt and take an ordinary Human child to live in the Enclaves. They can't learn Fae magic unless it's already in their blood."

Glori glanced at Lance, wondering if he had any magic in his blood, after all these generations. If he looked like Mortimer as much as Matilda said, maybe he was a throwback? Would that touch of magic help explain at least part of her unreasonable, hormonal attraction to him? She could only hope.

Or would that just make things more complicated and sticky?

Speaking of sticky--she could use an entire bottle of Hershey's Syrup right now.

"I made the bed sheet rope hold up against all logic," Matilda continued. "When I saw Uncle Maximilian climbing down after me, I made it break. All without realizing it. That working of unconscious magic attracted Feathedora. She showed up as I was trying to cross a river, saved my life, and was in the process of recruiting me when Mortimer showed up. Uncle Maximilian claimed he was injured trying to protect me from Visigoths." She snorted. "There weren't Visigoths in our part of the country for nearly thirty years, but of course, Maximilian wouldn't remember and it never occurred to Mortimer to question."

"Mortimer tried to skewer Feathedora, thinking he was protecting you--from a Fairy Visigoth?" Lance asked with a snicker.

"Feathedora tried out for the NFL, and almost made it," Glori muttered.

"All that aside, Mortimer wouldn't listen to me. He kept trying to chase Feathedora and she kept whacking him with her wand and sending him flying. He never could have hurt her--with his sword or lance, anyway. His mouth, however--"

"You don't have to explain that part. I've been on the receiving end of Mortimer's vocabulary," Lance said. "So he insulted the Fairy ... sorry, Fae. He insulted a Fae into cursing him, and you were so ticked at the moron, you went to live with her instead of going home and risking Uncle Max teaching you to lap dance."

"Hmm, I do like this new generation." She batted her eyelashes at him, which made Lance blush a little. "You, and probably the last ten generations, certainly don't deserve the curse. If I had thought Mortimer would ever convince some featherbrain to marry him and make him a father, I would have done something about the problem centuries ago."

“When there were still real princesses,” Glori muttered.

“We have to do something. The sooner the better. You shouldn’t settle for the first knight errant who comes along. I mean, honestly, Glori, much as I loved my brother, it was a relief to go into an Enclave and know the years were flying by. You don’t want to tangle yourself up with the males of my Human family. No, not at all. Thank goodness none of my sons inherited any of that bad blood. No, not at all. As much as Lance impresses me ... I suppose I have to change my mind. It’s only common sense. The two of you would not make a good couple.”

Glori’s mouth fell open. She had never heard Matilda talk this way about anyone. Certainly not in front of them.

What made it worse was that after a few frowning, confused moments, Lance seemed to understand exactly what she was talking about. He cocked his head to one side and gave Glori one of those considering looks that had her feeling hot and somewhat childish, as if she had been caught sneaking chocolate syrup and Coke into her bunk after the camp director declared lights out.

“A good couple?” he finally asked quietly.

“Oh, our dear Glori is going through a change in life and it’s affecting her magic somewhat dreadfully. That’s why her magic is working in reverse at the daycare. Usually a few easy spells keep the place spotless, free of disease and bullies and pests. Bugs, as well as politicians and telemarketers.”

“Change in life? Like, menopause?” Lance’s frown deepened. “You don’t look old enough. How old are you?”

“Even Fae women don’t like admitting their age,” Glori said so primly that she thought she could spit lemons. Whole.

“Glori is barely out of high school, in Fae terms.” Matilda patted her clenched hands, which gripped the edge of the table hard enough to threaten to dig holes in the wood. “No, this change in life requires certain ... stimulation.”

“Stimulation?” Lance blushed, dark red and hot enough Glori felt the air temperature rise from the other side of the table. “What exactly--“

“It all depends on the Fae woman involved. Anything from a light romantic encounter to a steamy affair to a lifetime commitment and soul-bonding on the deepest level.” Matilda glanced back and forth between them. “I was hoping you could provide her with some

amusement and diversion, help her release some steam, so to speak. Now, I'm not so sure." She sighed and bounced up from the table. "Well, now that those questions are cleared up, I think I should get going. Enjoy your dinner, children." She snapped her fingers. An enormous iridescent disk appeared in Glori's kitchen wall. She stepped through it and the disk vanished.

"Release some steam?" Lance growled. "Like, some cheap fling? A one-night stand? What kind of jerk does she think I am?"

"It wouldn't be one night. From the way Matilda was talking, it could be a couple months or a few years or even...." Glori saw the way his mouth dropped open and some of that insulted dismay in his eyes changed to a gleam of speculation. Her mouth got dry. Then his gaze flicked over her and that gleam turned to definite flames.

While it was gratifying to know Lance was attracted to her in a totally carnal manner, she wasn't interested in simply gratification without anything else. At least, not yet. And not in some cheap, no-strings-attached way, either.

"What's keeping Mama Jo's driver?" she muttered, and leaped up from the kitchen table before she really did dig her fingers through the wood.

Either her magic had some positive benefits when it went wonky, or Matilda had thought ahead. When Glori went to the door, she found both her car and Lance's truck neatly parked in the driveway, and all five delivery drivers pulling up in front of her cottage. Even on a good day, Glori couldn't have managed to coordinate the drivers. The law of averages and the Law of Invisibility simply precluded such use of magic on a regular basis.

Lance showed up as she dug in her pocket for the tip for the first one to reach her door, a girl wearing a baseball cap for the local college team and a brace on her wrist. He handed out five dollar bills to each driver who showed up and deposited their cartons and trays of steaming food in Glori's hands or on the front step.

"Thanks," she muttered, when the last one dashed down her flagstone front walk and vaulted the white picket fence to get to his car.

"I figure, you paid for dinner." He snorted and shook his head. "You know, I always wondered how it is I always have enough money for tips and emergencies, but I can never remember putting money in my wallet. Think I inherited some of that magic Matilda was talking about?"

Glori made the mistake of turning and looking up into his big blue eyes. There were

many different varieties of magic in the world, and not all of them had to do with inheritance or flashy special effects.

Although, come to think of it, she certainly would be interested in seeing what sort of fireworks and special effects Lance could produce.

Bad girl! She mentally slapped herself and focused all her attention on the food. That was why she had ordered it, anyway. For a distraction.

“Yes,” she finally managed to say. She stepped into the house and waited for Lance to get out of the way before kicking her door closed. “You probably do have some involuntary, unconscious magic working for you, as Matilda would put it.” Another thought occurred to her as they walked down the hall to her kitchen. “You’re taking all these revelations a little too calmly.”

“You didn’t grow up with ghosts flying through the walls and ceiling and trying to raise you to go hunting Fairies instead of playing baseball in high school.”

“Ah. We all have our handicaps.”

“Yours happens to be puberty.” He let his share of the hot cartons slide onto the table. “Sure you got enough food?”

“Puberty does that. Or so I’ve been warned.” She sighed, set down her own burden and started opening boxes.

“Exercise does that, too.”

That lovely, churning heat shot through her at the speculative caress in his voice. It tangled around her lungs, making it hard to breathe, then settled down low in her belly and sent out tendrils to make her fingertips and toes and lips tingle.

“What do you like better?” she said, concentrating on the food to keep from looking at him. “Kung pao chicken, hot and sour soup, ribs, chicken pizza with artichokes and olives, sun dried tomato and basil hummus with tabouli and mousaka and baklava on the side, or would you like to start with the dessert sampler tray from Aphrodite’s Bakery?”

“Dessert’s always a good place to start.”

Chapter Seven

Lance's hand on her shoulder startled Glori. She turned and found him standing so close she stumbled--right into the arm stretching out to wrap around her. The next thing Glori knew, Lance hauled her up against his chest. Yes, it was as warm and washboard rugged as she had guessed. Hoped. He cupped her cheek in his other hand and tilted her head slightly to the side and kissed her.

He tasted of cherry cola and his lips were warm and not too hard, not too thin, not wet. Just right.

I'm turning into Goldilocks. Glori pushed aside the analytical part of her brain and started to lift her hands, to hold onto Lance and really enjoy her first adult kiss.

"Wow." Lance grasped her shoulders and put her away to arm's length. His pupils were dilated so only a thin ring of blue showed around the black. He sucked in a deep breath, let it out, and his shoulders sagged. "I guess Matilda wasn't joking, was she?"

"Huh?"

Not the most intelligent thing she had ever said, but compared to the vulgar noises Theodosius had considered sexy and alluring, Glori knew she was still eons ahead of the game.

"You're a powder keg ready to go up. You really do need me as much as I need you." There was no warmth, no hunger in his eyes, and no indication that Lance wanted to continue that kiss. Just that same calculating look she had seen him use when he faced the challenge of her infested daycare building for the first time.

Cold showers had nothing on the arctic chill that raced through Glori's veins.

He didn't mean need, as in the Need, or even two stupid adolescents ready to rip at each other's clothes and practice artificial respiration on each other.

Lance meant need as in, he'd take care of her problem if she took care of his. Trade. As in, the offer he made that morning.

Except that, from the warmth and slight trembling she felt in the hands holding her

shoulders, Lance considered changing the terms of their deal. He thought he could have a good, hot tumble and maybe take care of a few other needs while she hunted for a reasonable facsimile to a Fae princess to lift his curse.

“Nothing a good vibrator couldn’t handle,” she rapped out, trying not to clench her teeth. She regained her balance and twisted her shoulders free of his grip. “At least my problem will go away in time.”

“Hey, Glori--”

“I said, my problem will *go away*. That’s a hint.”

“Huh?” He reached for her again, that smile coming back to soften his mouth. “This might turn out to be something good for both--”

Glori snapped her fingers at him and he vanished. She felt a moment of panic, just enough to make her knees wobble almost as badly as that kiss. Somehow, she made it to the front window and looked outside.

Lance sat on the support post for her front gate, grappling to keep his balance and not fall over backwards. She sighed, partly relieved at that show of controlled power, partly disappointed she hadn’t thought to have him straddling the post instead of his cute, tight butt perched on it. Lance got to his feet and turned to glare at the house. She ducked out of sight.

Well, he should be grateful she hadn’t left him straddling the jagged edges of the picket fence.

“I guess this generation isn’t as smart and well-mannered as Matilda thought,” she muttered, and stomped back to the kitchen. She needed to pig out after that magic she had just performed, but for once, she didn’t plan on starting with dessert.

Glori’s appetite wasn’t what she had expected, after the stress of the day and her fury with Lance. She couldn’t quite figure out why. She actually put most of the Greek food and the ribs and pizza away for later, and only ate two slices of carrot cake and one of the white chocolate cheesecake. When she came back from jamming the delivery cartons into the garbage can, she heard her answering machine click on.

“Look, Glori, I’m sorry. I was a jerk.” Lance sighed. “Okay, so only some of it is hereditary. But it’s been a really weird day and you’re soft and pretty and you taste good and I guess I got the wrong idea from Matilda. I thought maybe you were interested in me as a ... a pressure release valve. I’ll still be your exterminator, but could I be your friend, too? I won’t

expect anything past that. So I'm sorry. Again. I'm gonna keep working on your bug problem. Even if you don't keep looking for a princess for me. And I promise I'll keep my hands off you if you let me take you out for dinner tomorrow. Okay? You don't have to call me back. Just smile when I come by your school in the morning. Okay?"

She nearly reached for the phone when Lance paused. She heard him sigh, then a click, then the dial tone.

"But what if I don't want you to keep your hands off me?" she asked in a very small voice.

* * * *

"That was the stupidest thing you ever could have done," Rector Willoughby snarled. He swooped down from the ceiling, generating enough Afterlife energy to knock the phone off the wall, right after Lance hung it up.

"No, it was brilliant." Sir Mortimer conjured up a sword and wielded it like a fan, moving all the crowding ghosts away from Lance in the kitchen. "What woman can resist a little false humility? She'll be eating out of his hands. She'll be tripping over herself to find a Fairy princess. Good strategic thinking, boy. You take after me, after all."

"Yeah, and that's half the problem," Lance growled. "We wouldn't be in this mess if you'd done a little strategic thinking in the first place. But no, you have to jump in first and start stabbing people, instead of finding out what's going on. If you'd just waited to hear Matilda's side of the story--"

"Matilda?" Mortimer blew up to three times his normal size, filling the kitchen with churning fog and ectoplasm. It served to crowd all the rest of the ghosts out of the room, the ones who hadn't been intimidated by his misty sword. Unfortunately, conjuring up ectoplasm gave him some physical being, so he crowded Lance.

But Lance wasn't budging. Not after the day he had.

Lance stood his ground and wondered if he could use ectoplasm in his work. No bug would come near the stuff. He could put himself out of business and finally get one benefit from being haunted by family ghosts all his life. If there was ever any benefit.

"What about Matilda?" Mortimer roared, his face an interesting shade of transparent red and his hair standing out from his head in a bush.

"Your slimy Uncle Maximilian was trying to--" Lance paused. Molest was too modern

and sophisticated a word. He honestly didn't think Mortimer would understand it. It sounded French, and Mortimer had a loathing for anything French. Especially food. "He liked using little girls for sex, and Matilda was his next target. That's why she ran away that day."

"She didn't run. She was kidnapped. Matilda was too much a lady to run anywhere. Did that wretched Fairy tell you those lies?"

"No." Lance stepped forward, so he was nose to ectoplasmic nose with Mortimer. "Matilda told me her side of the story. That linebacker Fairy, uh ... Fae," he corrected himself. "That Fae woman *rescued* Matilda from the river after she fell in, and she was helping her get away from your creepy uncle. The guy stole your title and your castle, and you actually believed him when he said Matilda was kidnapped? Give me a break, Morty."

That stopped the knightly ghost for a previously unheard of ten seconds. Mortimer started to deflate. His eyes got round and troubled and the unhealthy color started to leach out of his face. Then he shook his head.

"That's a lie!" It lacked his usual bluster.

"Matilda is very happy. She's still alive and young and she says our family has Fae blood. That's why the curse worked the way it did, and that's why Feathedora came to rescue her. She was just taking care of one of her own. Nobody gets to be a Changeling unless they already have Fae blood."

Lance shook his head, amazed at how much he remembered, and that he believed a few things that were certainly contradictory to what Dudley had taught him about the Fairies. No, he had to call them Fae. A smile started to crook one corner of his mouth as he remembered Glori's little speech about 'smelly mortals.'

"Half-breeds?" Squire Rigley moaned. His Elizabethan-style neck ruffle puffed up in horror and his hair stood out straight in greasy strands. "We all have polluted blood?"

Half the other ghosts drew back in horror. Lance thought their collective gasps could have created a vacuum, if they'd been breathing real air.

"Not to belabor the point, but only Lance has any blood right now." Dudley floated in to take up some of the air space vacated when Mortimer deflated.

Lance took advantage of the maneuvering room to pick up the phone and slam it back into place on the wall.

"Matilda? My baby sister is still alive?" Mortimer gaped like a stranded fish for a little

longer, then he started to blow up again. This time he looked excited, rather than enraged. “We have to rescue her! She’s a prisoner of those filthy Fairies.”

“She’s Glori’s *supervisor*. She has a lot of power and she’s trying to help break the curse, you moronic bag of hot air!” Lance snapped back.

He caught a glimpse of himself in the stainless steel face of the refrigerator and recoiled. He looked like Mortimer, just like Matilda had said. That horrified him. How could Glori smile and sparkle at him like she did, when he was a red-faced, loud-mouthed, bull-headed idiot?

Of course, Matilda did say his generation was an improvement.

Not much of one, though.

Matilda didn’t think Lance was good enough for Glori. Maybe as a fling, to help her ease the pressure of this ‘change of life’ she was going through. But not for the long-term.

If that didn’t deflate him and cool his head--and other parts of his anatomy--nothing would.

Lance traded one more round of glares with the ghosts and stalked out of the kitchen.

No way in the world would he admit to those blockheads that he meant every word of his apology to Glori.

Everything but the part about not expecting anything more than friendship. He wanted a whole lot more. He wanted to be her pressure release valve for the rest of his life, because Glori sure built up some pressure in him that needed releasing.

If he could just find some way to get rid of the ghosts, everything would be perfect.

* * * *

The next morning began a routine that lasted for two weeks of peace. Lance and Glori met two hours before the daycare opened. He pumped in his various repellents and hung up bug traps. She wolfed down several pounds of dark chocolate and boosted her spells to work in concert with the chemicals. It really amazed him how she was able to push all those creepy crawlies into the walls to sleep the day away. If roaches and spiders and flies slept, they didn’t breed and they didn’t eat and they didn’t leave traces of themselves everywhere. The daycare looked perfectly spotless, once Glori got her recalcitrant cleaning spell working. The bugs stayed in the walls, and everything was perfect.

The next Monday, one mother heading for an early meeting dropped off her daughter half an hour ahead of schedule and caught Lance at the daycare. She immediately started asking

questions about pest control and the germs spread by insects. Lance knew how much damage one exaggerating parent could do to Glori's business. He did some quick thinking, remembering the calendar Glori had on the wall by the front door. Since she had no one lined up for Career Day that week, he told the curious mother that he was talking with Miss Glori about speaking to the children.

The gratitude in Glori's eyes made him feel as if he could fly. If she had kissed him ... well, it was a good thing she didn't kiss him, because the fireworks that might have resulted from that would have been hard to explain.

That Thursday, Lance got to meet Glori's children for the first time. And for the first time, he actually enjoyed talking about being an exterminator. The children asked amazing questions. He had never realized how intelligent and observant children were, and what strange ideas they came up with to explain adult behavior.

However, some things they got all too right.

"Are you Miss Glori's boyfriend?" a little girl with Shirley Temple ringlets asked, near the end of the morning.

"Yeah, when are you gonna go outside and suck face?" a little boy with two missing teeth crowed.

"Hey, pal," Lance stammered. "It's called kissing, and that's not something I discuss because...." His words trailed off when he inadvertently looked at Glori. She leaned against the wall at the back of the room, her hands pressed over her mouth, shuddering with laughter. At least, he hoped it was laughter and not terror.

"Well, it's just not something a gentleman discusses. How would you feel if someone said something that embarrassed Miss Glori?"

That was the right tactic to take with the children, silencing them, widening their eyes, and proving they loved their Miss Glori. He looked at her again, even knowing it wasn't smart. There was only so much distraction a man could take before his brains boiled over. Her eyes gleamed with tears and her face rippled through pink, lavender, robin's egg blue, pale green, around the spectrum back to pink. Sparks in matching colors shot off the ends of her ponytails.

He didn't find it strange at all. In fact, the way her face changed colors when she blushed and laughed--he hoped she was laughing--seemed perfectly right for her. It was a Glori kind of thing, and he wouldn't have her any other way.

But would she have him?

Somehow, Lance stammered his way through an explanation that got the children off the subject and back onto bugs. Glori said nothing about the children's questions and Lance decided if she wasn't horrified by the thought of kissing him, then he had made some progress. Life, all in all, was pretty great.

The problem came after the children left. Glori explained to Lance how the natural aura of magic exuded by Human children helped her keep her balance, recharged her batteries, and enforced all her spells so they worked like they were supposed to. But just like when the sun went down and solar batteries became drained, the magic reverted to its wonky state once the children had been gone an hour or two. Lance met Glori every evening, after the children and their parents were all gone, to set more traps, pump more bug repellent and kill more pests.

She was always tired, so their conversations over a burger or pizza didn't go much of anywhere. He would tell her stories about the various ghosts haunting him and the stupidity of his ancestors, and she would tell him about the Enclaves, growing up Fae and her daycare center.

Lance could see she really loved every child in her care. He knew she would make a wonderful mother, and wondered why she didn't have any children of her own yet.

Then he would remember Glori's problem. She had to finish growing up before she could have children.

Why would it be so bad for him to hook up with her? He had Fae blood, didn't he? So what if it was diluted? From what Glori told him about Matilda and her children, Halflings were accepted without any problem. From what Glori told him, Halflings were popular as spouses because they were free of some of the problems--like Glori's--that Fae faced.

He didn't know whether to be amused or disgusted that Matilda considered him acceptable as a short-term stud for Glori, but not as a long-term partner.

When he got home every night, the ghosts either lectured him about his stupidity in helping and making friends with a Fairy, or they gave him the silent treatment. Lance deliberately argued with the ghosts, in the hopes more would leave him alone for longer periods of time. The silent treatment was no punishment, from his viewpoint. Dudley, being Dudley, valued scholarship over family loyalty and kept him up late every night, talking about all the things he had learned about the Fae from Glori.

On Wednesday of their second week together, Lance came to do his evening

extermination work and found Glori sitting on the front step, wringing tears out of an enormous gossamer green handkerchief and looking like she was ready to tear her hair out by the roots. He barely got the truck stopped in time before he bolted out of the driver's seat, leaped over the fence and dropped down onto the step to wrap an arm around her.

“What happened?” he demanded. “Did they finally show up? I warned them, if they ever came to harass you, I'd figure out some way to pay them back.”

Every night, a few ghosts threatened to attack Glori at her daycare, while Lance wasn't there to run interference. Only reminding them that they would be hurting innocent Human children in the process kept them from haunting the daycare. They contented themselves with watering down his special formulas, breaking the hoses on his sprayers, breaking the seals on his bug traps and putting sugar in place of the poison. Lance had taken to checking the contents of his truck every morning before he headed out, to head off their sabotage.

“Who showed up?” Glori hiccupped and wiped at her eyes. Filled with tears, they glistened like jewels. She sniffed and shook her head. “It's finally happened. The children's magic isn't strong enough.”

Chapter Eight

“Strong enough?” Lance flipped through the file folders in his head, trying to figure out what she referred to.

“I had fights today. Four of them. My anti-bully spells haven’t just broken down, they’re working in reverse!” she wailed, and flung her arms around him and hid her face in his collar.

A little bit of coaxing got the details from her.

Bradley, who was normally the sweetest little boy, decided that he didn’t want to help pass out the apple slices for the morning snack. He wanted all the apple slices for himself. Usually, he was Glori’s best helper, an example to the rest of the class. When she reminded him that it was good to share, he threw a handful of apple slices at her. His best friends, Tyler and Robbie, tackled him and stole the rest of the treat. One whacked Bradley with the plastic serving tray until Glori wrestled it away from him, while the other boy lobbed apple slices at the rest of the class.

Then, during playtime, Tabitha pushed little Megan down in the mud. What really frightened Glori was that there hadn’t been mud in the fenced-in playground when she let the children out to play only ten minutes before. Tabitha had made fun of the jingle bells on Megan’s sneakers. Megan, who normally didn’t say more than three words in a row, told Tabitha to stay away because her shoes were dirty and ugly. Then she started to list everything that was wrong with the other girl, who until that moment had been her best friend. Until Tabitha threatened to push her down in the mud.

“Then the mud was just there,” Glori said, between a last few sobs. “Like the magic is helping them be nasty. I set it up to work like subliminals, you know? A little voice whispers to them that it’s nice to share and help people, and to ask instead of take. Things like that. My head hurts so much right now, I can’t check and listen, but I’ll just bet the magic is telling them to hit each other and nobody wants to be friends with them. It’s working backwards!”

“Just like your anti-pest spells,” Lance muttered. He barely heard himself, caught up in

the heart-thudding sensation of Glori pressed tight against him so he could feel every curve, every little movement of her chest against his as she sobbed out her misery and despair.

“Now, that’s what I like to see,” Matilda said, coming around the corner from the playground side of the building. “A little closeness, a little tenderness, a little--” She gasped. “Glori, what happened?”

“I hope it’s not the ghosts,” Lance said. That slipped out when he didn’t want it to. What could he do, with his attention divided between his purely male reaction to Glori pressed up close to him, and irritation with Matilda for showing up at the absolutely wrong time? Or maybe it was the right time. He couldn’t decide. And that was more of a distraction.

“The ghosts?” Sparks buzzed a few orbits around Matilda’s head as a frown settled in. “That pompous idiot brother of mine. Is he threatening Glori?”

“He wants me to make war, not love, when it comes to Fairies ... sorry, when it comes to Fae,” he hurried to add.

Glori sat up straight and stared, wide-eyed for several heartbeats. He watched her brimming tears shimmer through several different colors. For some funny reason, that just entranced him instead of making him shudder. The indoctrination of his childhood certainly couldn’t stand up against his attraction to her. Who could hate someone like Glori?

“What’s wrong?” he asked, when the staring continued.

She brushed the tears from her eyes, grinned wetly and shook her head.

“Maybe we should work on the problem so I can get going, and you can ... work out your other problems,” Matilda said. “I came by to see how the pest problem was going. Are you saying you think the ghosts are adding to it?”

Glori hurried to explain how the children had begun battling between themselves over silly matters, and some of them were turning into bullies. Lance’s gut twisted with guilt when she reluctantly added that several children hadn’t been themselves; had refused their afternoon snacks and looked a little green when their mothers picked them up from the daycare. He wondered if it was the extra-strength concoctions he kept pumping into the foundation and walls of her building, to kill the sleeping roaches and ants. He almost hoped it was his fault. Otherwise, Glori’s healing spells were working in reverse, too. Lance didn’t want that to happen to her. What was a Fae supposed to do when her magic worked backwards?

“Hey, I got an idea,” he said with a grin. He hoped Matilda and Glori found it funny, too.

“How about you do a spell reinforcing the one Feather-duster put on Mortimer? I figure, if your magic is working backwards to what you want, you’ll actually break the spell. Or at least set the ghosts free.” He shrugged.

“If only it were that simple.” Matilda nodded and some of the tension bowing her shoulders seemed to let up. “Good thinking, though. If only we could ensure that it wouldn’t triple the curse, instead.”

“Oh. Guess I need to learn the rules.”

If he spent time with Glori, long-term, he would have to learn the rules, wouldn’t he? Lance kind of liked that idea.

The problem was, they had to get through this current problem, first, before they worked on the long-term. Matilda’s idea turned out to be their best bet. Glori turned off her anti-bully and healing spells, rather than dismantling them as Lance expected. Putting a spell into neutral was far safer, when it was malfunctioning, than taking it apart. When Glori was healed of her problem, she wouldn’t have to go through the effort of re-making it.

The children at the daycare would simply have to take their chances with real bullies and childhood illnesses until her magic was back in working order.

“How about you set up a spell around the daycare, where it doesn’t interfere with Glori’s?” Lance suggested. “Maybe something to settle the kids down when they come in, and clean them up from whatever bugs--I mean, whatever germs they pick up from each other during the day?”

Glori stared at him again, her smile a little bigger than last time. Matilda nodded, her eyes bright, and nodded slowly. Lance didn’t know if he liked being the center of attention, even if he seemed to have the approval of two beautiful women.

“I said this generation was a vast improvement, didn’t I?” Matilda muttered. “Lance, you have a wonderful future as a Changeling.” Her smile died instantly and she sighed. “If we can clear up the curse problem. Until that magic is ridded out of your system, so to speak, there’s no way you can call up your inborn magic and learn to use it.”

“Changeling? Like--” He glanced at Glori. “Become a Fae?” He thought of the fury and dismay of the ghosts when he told them they had all carried a trace of Fae blood. Anything to irritate Mortimer and Willoughby. Dudley would be fascinated, but Dudley wouldn’t be around to study the rules of magic over his shoulder, any more than the other ghosts would be around to

gnash their misty teeth and call him a traitor. *If* he could ever manage to break the curse.

“If we manage to solve all our problems.” She nodded again. “I’ll put this spell up. You two get to work on taking care of the inside of the building, then I suggest you go home and get some rest. Or some fun.” She winked at Glori, who blushed from pink to lavender. “Whatever it takes to recharge your batteries. And preferably not alone,” she added on a half-whisper.

Lance definitely liked Matilda’s side of the family better than Mortimer’s.

* * * *

The half moon spilled watery light through the kitchen window when Matilda snapped her fingers to open the lock and the back door of Lance’s house. She stood for a few moments in the doorway, letting her shadow prowl ahead of her, searching the kitchen and then disengaging from her feet to go into the next room.

“Get her, boys!” a scratchy, ethereal voice tried to roar.

Flickers of translucent movement swirled around the shadow, which grew taller against the opposite wall and stood there, arms crossed, tapping a silent foot against the floor. The ghosts crashed through the shadow, through the wall, and banged into each other. This went on for nearly five minutes before Matilda sighed. Two snaps of her fingers turned the lights on through the entire house, and turned off the TV, which currently showed a rugby match. Howls of dismay quickly cut off when the attacking ghosts turned against the ones who were too engrossed in the game to join the battle.

“Enough, all of you!” Matilda trumpeted. She stomped into the house. The door slammed shut behind her. The shadow rolled off the wall and fluttered through the ghosts, back to join up with her. The ghosts grumbled and snarled, but followed the shadow. “Where are you, Mortimer? I know you’re the ringleader of this motley crew.”

“Matilda?” Sir Mortimer pressed both hands against his insubstantial chest and swayed, with his feet nearly four feet off the ground. “My darling little sister. How wonderful to see you.”

“I’ll just bet.” She turned to meet the eyes of each ghost in turn, glaring, making each smoky apparition either darken with shame or go transparent and try to hide. None of them were able to escape the kitchen, which made some of them churn and go white with agitation. “Now, what’s this I hear about you interfering with Lance and Glori?”

“Us? Interfere?” Dudley whimpered.

“We’re just protecting the purity of our bloodline,” Squire Ringley snapped at the same

time.

“So you were interfering. I thought so. What was it? Watering down Lance’s chemicals? Throwing a kink in Glori’s protective spells? Warping the power feed? Making the electromagnetic field around the building knot up, so she got brown-outs and power surges?”

“Didn’t think of that one,” someone muttered from the back of the cloudy crowd.

“Don’t even think of trying it,” she snapped.

“We didn’t do anything to her magic,” Rector Willoughby said. He pulled himself up as straight as his portly, ethereal frame would allow and affected a pose of righteous indignation. “We simply enforced the Afterlife grid around her building. In the name of protecting the innocent children, of course.”

“Your Afterlife grid, as you call that pathetic tangle of power lines and short-circuits, impinged on the Fae dominance lines. You didn’t shut down her magic. You put it into a series of knots that could end up killing someone. As in, the children inside that building. Do you know what happens to ghosts who cause the deaths of innocents while attempting unjustified revenge?” she asked, her tone going sugary sweet and coating the blade of her furious expression.

“Uh....” Dudley raised his hand and waved it to get her attention. Matilda sighed and nodded for him to speak. “The ghost of the innocent victim is given power over the nincompoops who caused the death, and becomes a raging spirit. We could conceivably set up a curse worse than the one we exist under already.”

“Did you think of that when these morons went sneaking off to cause trouble?”

“He’s been too busy trying to figure out ways to help Lance and that twit,” Mortimer grumbled.

“That ‘twit’ is a darling girl whom I adore. Lance couldn’t do any better than to hook up with her for the next five centuries.”

“No. Not on your life. Over my dead body. You can’t--”

“You don’t have a dead body anymore, Mortimer,” Matilda sighed. “Morty. Big brother. I adored you even when I knew you were an oblivious bumbler. But you have to let go of this stupid delusion. I’m very happy where I am. Lance has the chance to be a Changeling, like me, and live very happily. Glori is his soul-mate, and those don’t happen very often, even among the Fae.”

“Sentence that boy to an unnatural existence?” Willoughby roared. “I refuse!”

“Oh, and I suppose living with fifty ghosts and turning into a mouse at the dark of the moon is a natural existence?”

That shut them all up for nearly a full minute. Matilda waited until some of the ghosts twitched and looked at each other. Smoke trickled from the ears of Mortimer and Willoughby. She suspected that was a bad sign they were coming up with a truly dreadful idea or argument.

“You have several options, boys. You can let Glori and Lance enjoy being together, and decide *for themselves* what they want. Or you can interfere and ensure Lance is locked into the curse for the rest of his unnatural life,” Matilda said, putting steel and grit into her voice that she hadn’t used since her oldest son went through a rebellious decade. “Or, you can help them out and make it easier to find a way to break the curse. The less trouble Glori has with her daycare, the more energy she’ll have to devote to finding a Fae princess to kiss Lance and break the spell.”

“What if we don’t want to?” the sheriff snarled rather sulkily. “You’re our family, too. You have to help us. Why aren’t you working on breaking the curse? Why didn’t you try to break the curse at the beginning, you ungrateful--” He stopped, choking, with his tongue hanging out of his mouth and Mortimer’s metal-gauntleted hand around his throat.

“I told Mortimer I would help him, but he never had the wit to come ask me.”

“You were living with the bleeding Fairies!” her brother’s ghost roared, ending on a wail.

“And then,” she continued, raising her voice to silence the agreements and protests from the rest of the crowd, “I thought he wouldn’t be so rude as to get married and pass the curse on to his children. But he did. All of you. I honestly didn’t think any decent woman would have him. I must admit, though...” Her expression softened and took on a purring quality that had the ghosts straightening their ethereal clothes and stroking beards and moustaches. “The men of our family do have an enormous amount of charm.”

She waited, until every ghost smiled at her. Then her smile went flat.

“And an equally enormous amount of gall and selfishness, to enslave an innocent woman and curse future generations. Well, I’m here to tell you, gentlemen--or not, as the case may be--the curse stops with Lance. Are you going to help him find a normal life, and earn some freedom in the Afterlife for yourselves?”

“Sounds good to me,” a ghost in academic robes muttered from near the ceiling.

“What if we don’t help him at all?” Squire Rigley asked.

“Why, I’ll find a way to break the curse, but only for Lance. I’ll make sure you sorry excuses for men stay locked up together, barred from the rewards of the Afterlife, forced to witness Lance’s happiness without being able to make him hear or see you. And you won’t be able to do anything to him or to anyone he loves. Understood?”

Silence. Finally, a few ghosts muttered agreement, and others nodded.

They waited until she left, then they gathered around Mortimer, eyes beseeching or horrified or infuriated.

“Okay, boys,” he said, and glanced over his shoulder to make sure Matilda hadn’t come back into the house to spy on him. “We can’t let Lance get trapped with that twinkly little twitch of a Fairy, so we just have to make sure Matilda doesn’t find out what we’re doing. Easy, right? She’s only a woman.”

“What she doesn’t know won’t hurt us,” Dudley muttered. He shuddered. A few ghosts laughed at him, but others looked thoughtful.

“First thing we do is find Lance. If he’s not home by now, then he’s with the Fairy. Let’s see if we can’t pull her wings.”

Chapter Nine

“Are you sure?” Glori asked.

“You got something against a moonlight picnic?” Lance took his gaze off the highway for a few seconds and flashed a grin at her.

Truth to tell, he was starting to get a little nervous. It amazed him that he had dared to talk Glori into a date tonight, after her truly rotten day. It amazed him more that she agreed after only token resistance.

He just wished there was more moonlight. The moon was at half and fading fast. Less than seven days would get him to the dark of the moon. He still hadn't told Glori the full truth about the family curse, and by now, he knew what she thought about vermin in general, rodents in particular. True, he could be a cute mouse when he wasn't in a bad mood--but shifting from two hundred pounds of muscle into five ounces of lavender-silver fur always put him in a bad mood. He bit his mother, once. Would Glori pity him or run screaming when she saw what he became?

Lance shuddered at the mere thought of revealing his shame to her. Did he have to tell her?

If they wanted to have anything long-term, he most certainly did.

Especially if it became long-term because she liked him.

Or if she just took a long time finding someone with enough royal Fae blood to break his spell.

Lance thought about her comment about the current Fae leader being a man. Not even to break the spell could he endure a man kissing him. Especially since Glori got that weird look in her eyes when she talked about Theodosius, as if she suspected something strange or not quite savory about him.

Just what I need--a fag Fae. That thought brought a snort of rueful laughter from him.

“What?” Glori’s smile went crooked, but widened a little.

“Just thinking how weird it is, us being together, driving down the highway, getting along. All my life, the ghosts have been raising me to hate the thought of someone like you. Then you come along and ... makes a guy kind of glad to know there’s a little bit of magic in his blood. Know what I mean?”

“I hope so.” She blushed. In the moonlight filtering through the clouds, Lance watched her blush turn different colors other than pink. He decided he liked it on her. Who wanted an ordinary girl when he could have Glori?

Would he ever *have* Glori? They had known each other for a little more than a week. Was there anything between them besides her problems and his problems, and the hopeful partnership to resolve them?

“So, what do you like to eat? I really didn’t have a place in mind, just thought we’d drive until we find something,” he explained.

“Anything. Literally.” She slouched a little in the front seat of the truck and her gaze fastened on the road lost in darkness ahead of them. “Right now, I’m able to eat and enjoy everything and anything. Kind of depressing. Not that I’m a picky eater when I’m normal, but....” She sighed and shrugged and slouched a little lower.

“But what?”

“There’s something to be said for being able to go into ecstasy over peanut butter and jelly. Everything tastes so much better, lately. Everything is wonderful. All my senses are on overload and I think I’ll miss it when ... this problem is over.”

“Oh.”

Lance immediately pictured Glori going into ecstasies over a simple goodnight kiss. He wanted to see her shoot off sparks, like she did when she ate chocolate in the morning. He wanted to know he could make her shiver and glow. He wanted to know it was him, and not the bad influence of her ‘change of life.’ He almost swore out loud, and clenched his fists around the steering wheel.

The truck swerved. Now Lance swore, and gripped the wheel so hard his fingers tore through the padded leather cover. He saw the tree on the side of the highway reaching for them and yanked the wheel. Just before he could breathe a sigh of relief at that escape, the truck jolted.

He forgot about the ditch between the highway and the fence and trees.

Another hard yank on the wheel brought the wobbling truck back onto the berm. Lance slammed on the brake and skidded to a stop amid all the gravel.

He had liked knowing he and Glori were the only ones on the highway. Every bit of privacy for them was precious. Now, he felt totally abandoned. He sat still for a few seconds, listening to the engine whine and cough and then die, and the hissing of the engine as a puff of steam rose from under the hood. The chirring of crickets blasted through the walls of the truck as if someone had set the volume to chop-and-liquefy.

“That was a little weird,” Glori muttered.

Lance nodded, sighed, took a deep breath, and opened the door. He had to figure out what had happened. Or maybe it was several somethings, all hitting with ... amazing timing.

By the time he got his rebellious cell phone working--when he had never had even a speck of static before on this stretch of highway before--and AAA came to get them, it was nearly ten. Lance fought his bad mood, like sand under his skin and trickling down his back. He knew part of it was irritation with his normally trouble-free truck. How in the world did two tires go flat at the same time the radiator decided to boil over? And how did oil get into the transmission fluid and transmission fluid get into the oil?

Part of it was watching the moon come up and seeing it look a little smaller, a little closer to a crescent, every time he blinked. Less than a week until the dark of the moon. He wouldn't be able to see Glori, then. She wouldn't want to see him.

Lance settled for the closest restaurant the AAA worker could drop them at, and called for delivery of a rental car. Glori brightened up a little when they walked into the 24-hour, all-you-can-eat buffet. She had been unusually silent while they waited for help to come, but Lance suspected he could blame that on his tendency to pace along the side of the highway, scuff the gravel and mumble curses. Maybe now she would start talking again. He loved listening to her voice.

On the plus side, so late at night, there weren't many people around. He and Glori could talk about anything and everything, and nobody would overhear them and think them strange.

On the negative side, there weren't many people around. Lance couldn't believe this restaurant was such a dive. He had been in here dozens of times and it always looked bright and clean and the food smelled fantastic. That couldn't be attributed just to the crowded conditions, could it? Looking at the place now, with napkins and straw wrappers, silverware and mixed

vegetables on the floor, Lance wondered what had gone wrong. The tables had shiny coatings interspersed with crumbs, in the few places where their surfaces could be seen through piles of dirty dishes.

No steam at all came from the steam tables, and that wasn't a good sign.

"Ah ... two," he said, to the lone, gum-cracking, pimply-faced, size-twenty-in-size-twelve jeans, bewhiskered old woman who came to the register. After he and Glori had stood there for nearly ten minutes.

"Sure. Sit wherever." She gestured at the tangle of empty tables with one hand while ringing up their bill on the register with the other.

The register refused to open and the white paper tape spooled out, hitting her in the face. She cursed and staggered backwards. Lights flashed on the register and it started playing a tune among all the beeps and pings. Glori's eyes got big and she backed away. Toward the door.

Lance thought that was a good idea. He hooked his arm through hers and tried to keep from bolting. The woman at the register didn't even notice as they fled outside.

After walking three blocks, and calling the rental place to find out when the car would be delivered, they ended up at a burger joint Lance had never seen before. They got their burgers and fries and sat down in the first booth where they could see the badly lit street out front. Like someone had lifted a gate, a parade of roaches and silverfish streamed out of cracks in the walls and over the back of the booth seats. Glori let out a squeal, dropped her burger--which immediately vanished under a wave of wriggly carapaces--and fled outside.

The car, when it pulled up five minutes later, was a candy apple red, vintage convertible.

Before he quite knew why he did it, Lance took the car down a couple back roads and went into territory that only hormonally anxious teens admitted existed. Adults, if they wanted to retain their sanity, wisely forgot about the old quarry with the spectacular view of the entire valley and the city spread out before it in the moonlight. Or the convenient clumps of trees that muffled all sound so every car and courting couple had an assurance of privacy.

"Uh ... Lance?" Glori sat up a little straighter and glanced all around their parking spot.

A sheer wall of shale rose up on the left only two feet from her door. The plateau was relatively flat, until it dropped off straight down six feet from Lance's door. Tangled branches of dead trees were looped with vines, creating a canopy overhead and blocking the way ahead of them. They had a spectacular view of the valley and city, like diamonds glowing in the darkness.

Or would faerie lights be more appropriate?

“Great, isn’t it?”

“Why are we here?” She looked up at the shadows of vines and dead branches. There wasn’t a breath of wind, but those shadows seemed to be moving.

“You know, I never came here when I was a kid. Never found a pretty girl who’d come up here with me.”

“But why?” Glori let out a little squeak when Lance slid over on the wide bench seat and slid an arm around her shoulders.

“You never heard of Lovers’ Lane?” His heart thudded so loud and hard, Lance could barely hear the crickets chirring. He felt his pulse in the roots of his teeth. And other anatomical reactions he hadn’t thought he would ever feel with a real girl next to him.

“This isn’t a lane. It’s a--” Glori tried to move over against the door, but he tightened his arm around her.

“I really want to kiss you. When are we ever going to get the privacy for that?” he said, his voice dropping to a husky whisper by the time he got to the last word.

“Kiss?” She went perfectly still and those big green eyes of hers got big and glowed like they were filled with stars. “You want to kiss me?”

“Something wrong with that?” He grinned and adjusted his hold on her, since she certainly wasn’t stiff and pulling away now. Lance suspected there was enough room in the front seat to lift Glori up onto his lap. Which would certainly make kissing a whole lot easier.

“No. I just thought you weren’t ... interested in me anymore.”

“If I was any more interested, we’d have to get a hotel room.”

“Why would--oh!”

This close, Lance caught the full impact of the delicate shifts of color in her skin when she blushed. Who wanted an ordinary Human girl when he had Glori?

“Do you mind?” he whispered.

“Let’s take it one step at a time.” She slid one hand up his chest, trembling a little as she trailed her fingertips around his neck, then hooked her arm around it, to hold herself up close against him. “Like this?”

“Leave the driving to me, okay?”

Glori giggled as he lowered his mouth to hers, and the sound tickled, buzzing deep inside

his mouth.

Fireworks. Only better. Freight trains rumbled through his whole body and thunder made his fingertips buzz. Glori tasted of peaches, strawberries and honey. Lance made himself move slowly, just because he didn't have enough experience to have confidence. This was Glori's first kiss, and he wanted it to be as memorable for her as it would be for him.

After all, didn't he have a tradition of knights rescuing fair maidens in his family line? He had a reputation to live up to--even if he hadn't contributed to that reputation yet.

"Hmmm, nice," Glori whispered, the first time Lance paused to take a breath and open his eyes to get his bearings.

Her eyes stayed closed. Somehow she had ended up on his lap, with both her arms around his neck and every bit of her pressed up against him, soft and warm and pliant. Lance tangled his fingers in the long curls spilling down her back, and sparkles rose from his touch. He laughed, remembering how he had thought fireflies were Faeries. With Glori nestled safe and warm on his lap, he was definitely glad Faeries weren't that small. He liked big girls. Life-size girls. Sweet-tasting, warm, smiling, willing girls who knew he was under a curse and didn't mind at all.

That lowered his temperature about ten degrees. Glori knew he was under a curse, but had he ever told her the full, intimate, disgusting details?

"Uh, Glori--" Lance stopped himself. Only an idiot would ruin the moment with ugly bits of truth.

She took the decision out of his hands when she hitched herself up against him and took his mouth prisoner.

Lance had to hand it to her. Glori started out as a novice about fifteen minutes ago, but she was a fast learner. She did things with her tongue inside his mouth that he had never considered. Of course, his experience wasn't that extensive, either.

Right that moment, he decided he and Glori were going to be together a long time, experimenting and learning from each other.

The buzzing in his fingertips grew stronger. Hotter. The freight trains in his blood rumbled harder.

Something hit the back of his head, hard, sharp and scratching. Lance shrugged his shoulders, blaming mosquitoes.

"Dead to the world, boys," a disgustingly familiar voice hissed.

Glori twitched and her mouth went perfectly still against his.

“Don’t stop,” Lance whispered. “Maybe they’ll go away.”

“I heard that, you ungrateful, slobbering, brainless--”

Chapter Ten

Rector Willoughby's tirade vanished in an avalanche of curses from the majority of the ghostly roundup. The branches overhead swayed and bits of vines and bird nests and then twigs and leaves rained down on them. Glori yelped when someone's anger gave them the energy to yank on her shirt, exposing her lacy, glittery green bra.

Well, not that much of a bra, more like a camisole, with not much underneath it. There wasn't much at all to Glori, all fluff and glitter and starlight and--

"Not much underneath it?" she squealed, and jerked herself off his lap. "So, what were we doing, if there's not much to me?"

"Glori--" Lance winced and cursed as a branch slapped him across the face. Shouldn't he have known it when she started reading his mind? He scrambled up on his knees in the seat and swung his arms, deflecting the waving, dipping branches. "Come on out and fight like real men!"

The total silence from the ghosts slammed down on them like a twenty-ton freighter. He realized half a second too late, that was the wrong thing to say. Even if it did stop the attack.

"Kind of sad when the only real men around are ghosts," Squire Rigley snarled.

"Prepare to die, vile creature of magic!" Sir Mortimer howled, and streaked through the tangle of branches and vines, bearing an all-too-solid clothesline pole with its metal hook sharpened.

"Good-bye!" Glori yelped, and vanished in a spurt of green and gold sparks.

Well, at least something was working right tonight.

"Wait a minute." Lance ducked as the pole slammed into the seat only three inches from his ribs. He swung, but it was useless trying to cold cock Mortimer. "You've been here the whole time, haven't you?" He ended on a roar that sent half the ghosts sprawling through the night. Far more effective than trying to clobber them. He wished he had thought of the tactic years ago.

Fury made his hands shake as he jammed the keys into the ignition and slammed the car into reverse. A flicker of movement and light gave him hope for a moment, but it was only

Dudley, settling into the seat. No chance Glori had come back.

“Not a bit of royal blood in her,” the scholarly ghost sighed, after Lance had driven most of the way home in silence.

“Yeah, and what’s that supposed to mean?”

“She kissed you. Most willingly. If she was even distantly royal, the curse should have broken.”

“Really?” Lance growled at the red light ahead of him. As if it heard, the light flickered quickly to green. “How would I have known?”

Dudley opened his mouth to answer--and stopped. For the first time Lance could recall, the scholarly ghost had no answer. They pulled up in front of the house and Dudley vanished. Lance’s feet dragged as he made his way to the back door and went in through the kitchen.

For the first time that he could ever remember, no ghost came zipping through a wall to interrogate him. No coarse guffaws came from the TV room. No chill in the air as he climbed the stairs. No scowling face peered out of the mirror at him when he stepped into the bathroom. No disgruntled ancestor stole his towel or turned the water to cold when he took his shower.

Lance thought he could get used to it. However, he suspected the ghosts would be back too soon, to make him pay for his ‘impertinence’ toward his elders, whom he had to respect whether they did anything to deserve it or not. They couldn’t stay away. It was the nature of the curse.

Too bad Glori could--and most likely would--stay away. That was probably part of the curse, too.

* * * *

“Never, ever, ever again,” Glori moaned. She looked at the triple chocolate ice cream lying in a vat of peanut butter sauce, which had materialized in front of her the moment she stumbled through the door of her house. For the first time she could ever remember, she didn’t want or need--and even felt slightly nauseated by--the thought and sight and smell of all that chocolate and sugar and fat.

When had that ever happened?

About twenty minutes ago, she knew, when she had tasted Lance’s kiss. There were some things even more intoxicating than dark chocolate and diet cherry cola. Lance Knight was the most potent.

And she would never kiss him again.

Why hadn't she asked Matilda about the specific details of the curse? A half second later she answered herself--because she should have known. Feathedora was notorious for her long-lasting, multi-layered curses, reaching to the third generation.

The problem was that Lance was somewhere past the twentieth generation.

The only way Glori could see to break the curse, without forcing Lance to endure Theodosius making a pass at him, was for Lance to father a daughter. The curse only clung to the men. The ghosts most likely wouldn't be able to latch onto a girl of their bloodline. They would probably be horrified at the thought of a woman as their heir, and just implode if they didn't vanish into the Afterlife. If Lance had a daughter, the suffering would be ended.

But what if she was wrong? How could she inflict that kind of suffering on an innocent child?

For that matter, how could Lance's ancestors have inflicted that kind of life on any of their descendants?

From what Matilda had told her about Mortimer, Glori had her answer. They were all arrogant, testosterone-poisoned, oblivious, self-righteous....

"But Lance isn't anything like them!" she wailed, and put her head down on the table.

After making sure she didn't get an ice cream facial.

The only thing Glori could be sure of now was that even if she could convince Lance to try to have a daughter, it would take magic to ensure that birth. Magic she didn't have. Not at that level of fine-tuned control. Not until she had taken care of the Need. Lance could cure the Need, but it would require a long-term commitment from him.

Suppose Lance wanted to bind his life to hers for the rest of his life? She couldn't marry Lance, because the ghosts wouldn't give them a moment's peace. How could she and Lance conceive a child--just the thought of that sent a warm, electric thrill through her that stole her breath--if they couldn't have any privacy?

No, the best thing to do for Lance was to go away to an Enclave, take a mate from the least repulsive of the males there, and use her restored magic to find him the perfect wife. And then make sure they conceived a daughter on their honeymoon.

After that, Glori would just have to retire to an Enclave for the next hundred years, until she knew Lance was dead and gone.

For his sake, she would do it. No matter how much it hurt.
No matter how many great shows she would miss on TV.
No matter how much she wanted just one more kiss from Lance.

* * * *

Lance didn't show up at the daycare the next morning. Glori really hadn't expected him to. Either the ghosts had given him an extra difficult time for 'consorting with the enemy,' or he was too ashamed and too careful of her feelings to show his face.

There was enough bug repellent and other chemicals pumped into the daycare to take care of the day's needs. She ate a bag of Hershey's Miniatures and boosted all her spells to last the day.

Six children didn't come to school. Their mothers called to report an assortment of maladies: chicken pox, flu, diarrhea.

That had never happened in Glori's daycare. She had to get things back to the way it had always been. Or was it better to just pack it in, close the place, and get out of there?

Just before lunchtime, two of her most angelic boys decided they wanted to be kings of the playground. While one ran around swatting the little girls on their bare legs with a sword made of Hot Wheels track, the other one climbed to the top of the jungle gym and kicked anyone who tried to climb up anywhere near him. The growls and snarls and generally nasty words spilling out of the two boys' mouths made Glori shudder.

Smack!

"Miss Glori, make him stop!"

"It's mine! Go away! I'll kick you in the face if you climb up here!"

Smack! Shriek!

"Miss Glori!"

Smack! Shriek!

"Go away or I'll stick my sword in your eyeballs!"

"Get out of there! Miss Glori! Make him share the castle with us!"

"Miss Glori, he pushed me down!"

"Miss Glori, Bradley was mean!"

"Miss Glori--"

It was enough to make her wish for the quiet of an Enclave garden. Or maybe Matilda's

suggestion of hiding in a convent made more sense?

Glori was tempted to let the one suffer the wrath of his victims when they suddenly, and uncharacteristically, banded together and descended on him with screams, kicking feet and flying fists. Straining her pitiful reserves of magic, she separated the combatants and dragged them inside for early naps.

The other boy stood up one time too many on top of the jungle gym, and fell. She let him bump and thump against the bars, but worked herself into a migraine to keep him from breaking his arm when he landed. He and the rest of the playground soldiers came inside for naps as well.

This had to stop. She couldn't let her beloved children suffer because she was undergoing hormonal and emotional imbalances.

A wise Fae knew when to retreat and give up living life on the Human edge.

"Do you want a story?" she asked, when the children woke up from their extended naps.

Happy cries escaped mouths full of cookies. She laughed when Megan hurried to pick up the story hat from its peg behind her desk, and nearly tripped over her sandaled feet to bring it to her. Glori thanked the child and put on the tall, pointy hat, letting the glittery veil float down over her face. She had made the hat on a whim, reacting to the children's insistence that all Faeries wore such hats when they worked magic. Even the men.

Theodosius, maybe. Most Fae men, fortunately, no.

Glori refused to wear such a gaudy thing when it had been in fashion for a decade or two back in the sixteenth century. But for the children, she would do anything.

"Once upon a time," she began, speaking slowly so the children could say the magical opening words in chorus with her, "there was a handsome knight who lived under a curse. He hadn't done anything wrong. In fact, he was a very good man who spent his life helping people."

"Did he take out the trash and kill bugs?" little Madeline asked through a mouthful of cookies.

For a moment, Glori froze. Had some roaches made it past Lance's pesticides and her magic? Then she remembered Madeline's mother, who was divorced three times and loudly maintained there were only two uses for men: to take out the trash and kill bugs. It occurred to Glori that if Madeline's mother had been married three times, that disqualified her as an expert on the subject of men.

"Oh, he took out all the trash he could find, and he went hunting bugs to kill, so little girls

and big girls wouldn't be scared by them." Glori blinked quickly to fight tears. She would sorely miss Lance, her bug-killing knight in denim armor.

"The knight spent his whole life making up for the mean, nasty things his grandfather and his grandfather's grandfather had done. And he was very good at it. But he still had the curse sitting on his shoulders, and it made him very sad. There was only one thing that could break the curse. Do you know what that is?"

"A kiss from a handsome prince?" Gretchen lisped. She didn't look too certain of her answer. Several boys on the other side of the room giggled and snorted and one threw a cookie at her.

"Be careful, Robbie. Throwing things isn't nice. Someone might throw things at you." Glori flicked her fingers and the cookie hit the thrower between the eyes, rendering him silent for the rest of the story. "How would you like it if that happened to you?"

Robbie blinked and shook his head, scattering cookie crumbs. He settled back onto his carpet square and kept his mouth shut.

"Well, when it comes to handsome knights, it's a kiss from a beautiful Faerie princess that will break the curse. But this knight was very, very sad, because in his country, there were no Faeries and that meant no Faerie princesses. All the Fairies lived very, very far away."

The Enclaves and their time warping shields were about as far away as Glori could get from Lance without leaving the planet. Just the thought of going into one made her feel like a prisoner with a death sentence. But she had to do it for him.

"Did he go looking for one?" Michael asked.

"You could kiss him," Bonita said a half second later. Several of her little girlfriends squealed and yelped agreement. "You can break the curse, can't you, Miss Glori?"

"The curse needs a Faerie princess." Glori swallowed hard and forced her lips into a smile when she wanted to drop down to the floor, put her head between her knees and wail until the ceiling caved in. "I'm not one."

"You can be!" Leila bounced up from her chair and grabbed the hands of two other girls at their table.

Before Glori quite knew it, she was surrounded by most of the girls, almost drowning in a sea of laughing, jabbering, squealing voices. Little hands patted her and other little hands waved. Three girls ran to the dress-up closet and brought out the fairy wands they had made months ago,

crusted with glitter and sequins and dripping long strands of blue and gold and silver tinsel.

“What are you doing?” she asked, laughing almost too hard to speak clearly.

“We’re making you a Faerie princess,” Tracy said, and started stomping in a circle around Glori. In a moment, the other girls fell in line behind her. “Then you can kiss the knight and break his curse.

Glori fought tears as the children walked around her in their serious little circle. Soon, all the girls, and nearly one-third of the boys had joined in. From time to time, one would step into the clear space where she stood and hug her. It was a ritual her first children had created years ago, handed down from one crop of darlings to the next. Glori felt her head clear and her balance and energy return under the heady, exhilarating power of the children’s unwavering belief.

If only the answer could be that simple.

They had magic enough just in their love for her to replenish her strength and push away the faint sourness in the air from Lance’s bug-juice, so the remainder of the day was a delight. Glori didn’t tell them that their attempts at such reality-altering magic were futile. She loved them too much to dash their hopes. Yes, the power of belief did sometimes overrule destiny and strength and even cruelty and death. But not this time. This curse that surrounded Lance, and the demands of the Need, were too strong. Even for her beloved children.

They were why she had to leave. She had to protect them. She loved them so very much.

So she didn’t tell them she was closing the daycare. She couldn’t do it so abruptly, when their loving, natural magic made the remainder of the day such a joy. Glori sent her children home at the end of the day and sat down at her desk to write up the flyer she would send home to their parents on Friday.

She put her head down on the papers on her desk and burst into tears.

Chapter Eleven

Lance found her that way when he walked into the daycare less than two minutes after the last minivan pulled away. He had parked his truck across the street and watched, wanting to go in just to look at Glori, and afraid that she would send him away. As soon as the last child climbed into her mother's car to leave, he pulled out into the street and squealed to a stop in front of the door.

When he opened the door and saw Glori crying, he let out a choked cry and nearly flew across the room to gather her up in his arms. Glori whimpered and struggled for a few seconds, then let out a wail that threatened his eardrums and flung her arms around his neck.

"Please, honey, don't cry. It'll work out," he said, trying to make his tone soothing. He sat down on one of the children's tables, nearly killing his back with the angle because it was so low to the ground. The plywood creaked alarmingly under him and he scooted over to one end where the legs would support him. "It'll be okay. I promise. Whatever it takes, I'll fix it. Hey, I kept the grumpy ghosts away all night--I can do anything."

Lance had glimpsed a few flickers of ectoplasmic movement in the shadowy corners of the house while he shaved and got ready for the day, but he could ignore that. As long as his ancestors stayed quiet and didn't throw things at him or interfere with more dates and kissing Glori, he would peacefully co-exist with them.

Whatever it took to keep Glori in his life, he'd do.

"You can't do this," she said, her words sounding positively soggy through her sobs. "I'm closing the daycare. I can't do this to my children any longer. I'm no use to you--"

"You're the best thing that ever happened to me!"

"Then your life really sucks." She startled herself with such a word escaping her lips.

So startled, her sobs stopped for a moment. She leaned back and blinked away the tears. To her surprise, Lance just grinned crookedly at her.

"Don't leave me, Glori. Yeah, it was rough last night, but I found out I have more power

over the grumpy old men than I thought I did. If you can put up with a little spying and yelling once in a while, I think we can make a go of it.”

As she started to calm down, Glori felt the heat of his body seeping through her, soothing the ache that had been hiding inside her soul all day. Unfortunately, that soothing threatened to turn into a raging bonfire, thanks to the time bomb of Need.

“I can’t help you the way I am,” she whispered. If she talked any louder, she knew she’d break into tears again. “I have to go to an Enclave and find a mate and ... get things settled down. Then, when my magic is working again, I’ll be able to find a solution for you.”

“Live *without* you and be a normal guy, or live *with* you and put up with being Squeaker the Mouse two nights a month? Gee, what a choice.” He shifted her higher on his lap, which produced an interesting reaction in both their anatomies.

“I have a better idea.” He bent his head so his forehead rested against hers. Glori shuddered with hungry wanting, even as something melted inside at the gentle, intimate, yet protective touch. “How about we work on the things we can handle? I keep working on your bug problem, and you get Matilda to help you take care of the ghosts? I’d rather be stuck in fur and nibbling cheese for the rest of my life--well, two nights every month--than live without you.”

“Oh, Lance....” Glori blinked away more tears. She took a deep breath, fighting not to burst out into more wails that would probably bring the roof down. “I love you, too.”

She slid her fingers through the thick mane of his hair, sat up straighter in his arms and tipped her head to the side, for just the right angle. Lance was ready for her as she pressed her lips against his. He moaned, his lips parting.

Lightning shot through her from her toes to the ends of her hair. Glori whimpered as their tongues tangled and Lance clutched her close enough, tight enough, she could hardly breathe.

Fireworks exploded behind her eyelids and the ground shuddered under them. Waves of lava and glacial ice moved over her. Glori clung to Lance, even as she acknowledged that the Need had just blasted off the scale. If she didn’t get out of there soon, they would both be in big trouble.

Lance shouted and leaped to his feet, and dropped her. Glori yelped as she landed on the floor. Then she opened her eyes and shrieked and scrambled away from him, crab-style.

His nose elongated, warping his face as his eyes got small and beady black and lavender-silver fur sprouted all over his body. Then there was a loud *crack* and Lance vanished. His

clothes stayed standing in the air for half a second, then they collapsed to the ground.

“Lance?” Glori shrieked when a mouse with a corkscrew tail erupted through the neck of Lance’s shirt, squeaking in fury. She had never learned mouse language, but she could guess he was cursing up a storm.

Curse?

That was Lance?

Before she could catch her breath, the mouse leaped three feet in the air, writhing and shooting off silver sparks. As he fell back to the floor, he grew. And grew. Until suddenly there was six feet of mouse standing on his hind legs in the puddle of Lance’s abandoned clothes.

His voice got lower as he grew bigger, and that was weirder and more frightening than anything she had seen so far.

Until the mouse started morphing, looking like something that was half-Human, still covered in lavender velvet fur, still with that corkscrew tail. Glori felt the magic pressure begin to build. Something was about to explode. Terror got her limbs moving again and she scrambled to get to her feet and run.

There was a loud pop--if a soap bubble twenty feet in diameter with an inch-thick rind could pop rather than explode. Lavender and silver sparks blinded her for a moment, and the force of the blast threw her backwards a dozen more feet. Waves of magic spread through the room. She felt the floor wobble like gelatin under her. Glori opened one eye and looked around. The walls were doing the same, everything wavering like an underwater effect in the movies. When she stopped rubbing her eyes, she saw silver-lavender fur everywhere around the room. As if a dozen feather pillows had exploded.

“Lance?” she shrieked. She turned to where she had seen him last, in whatever shape he had been.

Lance crouched on his hands and knees just a few feet away from her, gasping and choking, dripping in sweat and cursing like a sailor.

And buck naked.

Glori fought the urge to just sit there and stare, feasting her eyes on what she wanted more than triple-fudge brownie sundaes, diet cherry cola and satellite feed. She knew if she didn’t move, didn’t turn her head away, didn’t think of something, *anything* else, Need would overrule every bit of what remained of her good sense.

“Lance?” She got up onto her knees and crept forward. One hand reached out to touch his glistening shoulder. She snatched it back. And slapped the foolish hand with the other hand for good measure. “I’ll get you something to wear.”

Glori congratulated herself for good sense as she dashed into the storage closet where the children’s dress-up clothes were stored. She had lots of men’s clothes, bought from the Salvation Army store. Whether anything would fit Lance or not, she didn’t really care. She just had to get away before she attacked him. It was a relief to close the door between them and nearly dive into the barrels and boxes of clothes. In too short a time, she found a faded denim shirt and a baggy pair of workout shorts that might be too big even for Lance.

“Nice place,” Lance said.

Glori shrieked and turned around so quickly she fell, right into the pile of mats and blankets used for the children’s naps. In an instant, Lance was down on his knees next to her, trapping her with an arm on either side of her.

“Let me get this straight,” he said. His voice sounded strong and steady, and that frightening pallor and sweat had vanished. He grinned and mischief burned in his eyes.

Or was that something else burning in his eyes? Glori felt an answering heat churn in her belly.

“If we make love while you’re in the middle of this change of life thing--”

“It’s called the Need,” she whispered.

“Sounds good to me.” Lance’s grin widened, turned wolfish. “If we make love, then you’re stuck with me, just as much as I’m stuck with you, right?”

“With Humans, it might be--”

He stopped her words with a kiss that sucked all the thoughts out of her head. Glori didn’t even try to struggle for a sense of sanity until she felt the tiny shiver of magic along her skin and her clothes vanished.

“Did you do that, or did I?” Lance gasped, finally releasing her mouth.

“Who cares?” She reached for him, pulling him back down into the tangle of blankets and mats.

“I do.” He caught her wrists in his big, hot hands and pinned them. “Matilda said I had Fae blood, and there was magic in me. If I have enough magic to do that, then I’m good enough for you, right?”

“You’re too good for me, Lance. Please--” Glori gasped as that moment of reprieve let a little common sense sneak into her head. And other parts of her anatomy. “Lance, we shouldn’t. This isn’t right. It isn’t fair to you.”

“What isn’t fair is if you don’t marry me. I’m not letting you out of my sight for a minute,” he growled, and stretched out on top of her.

Glori was a very common sense Fae and knew when to stop fighting and start enjoying the ride.

It was a wild ride. Sometimes they rolled across the ceiling. Glori had no idea, and didn’t care, which one of them did the magic to make that possible. Sometimes they floated amid real fireworks. The sparks ignited nothing in the storage closet, nothing outside their bodies. Inside them ... that was another matter altogether.

“Did you ask me to marry you?” she whispered, in the drowsy quiet a long, long time later.

“I *demand* you marry me.” Lance sighed, the sound rough with a hint of laughter. “You broke my curse, you know. I swore I’d never fall in love, never try to keep a woman in my life, until it was broken. You did that. I’m no idiot. You’re stuck with me, woman. Just in case Feathedora decides to come back for part two.”

Glori giggled and opened her eyes. “How could I break the curse? You need--”

Her brain started working, jolted with dozens of images and sensations that hurtled through her memory like a freight train.

Lance *shouldn’t* have turned into a giant mouse in broad daylight, before the dark of the moon. Unless the curse was making a last gasp effort to hang onto him.

It happened right after she kissed him.

She kissed him the day the children worked their play magic, turning her into a Fae princess.

It took the kiss of a Fae princess to break the curse.

“The kids turned you into a princess?” Lance stared, confused when she explained her theory. “How could they do that?”

“I’ll explain later. Let’s fix my spells, then we’ll go home--my place or yours?” She fluttered her eyelashes at him, prompting a hoot of laughter.

“Your place. I don’t want to find out if the ghostly roundup is still around or they got sent

onwards, until I absolutely have to know.”

“Okay. Then we’ll go to my place and celebrate.”

“Forever.” Lance gathered her into his arms and rolled onto his back, pulling her on top of him, and captured her mouth for one of those kisses that sucked all the thoughts out of her head.

Glori laughed, sighing, and settled down to enjoy the ride. Just because they had eternity didn’t mean they could waste a moment.

She hoped Matilda was right, and all this laughing and playing and passion would put a Halfling bun in her oven. Glori wanted children. Lance’s children. She owed her life and her sanity, and her love, to children.

Anybody with any sense at all knows children have a magic of their own.

THE END