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*My Darling
Druid*



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My Darling Druid

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MY DARLING DRUID

Jean Hart Stewart

Dedicated to my mother, who guaranteed I had books to read and time to read them.

Chapter One

London Hospital, 1919

The child on the bed twitched, sighed and then quietly fell asleep. Nurse Vivie Field's breath whooshed in relief as she leaned against the wall. Blessed Merlin! Her hands ached from an hour of wringing cloths with ice water. Their application was finally reducing Betsey's fever. When Matron returned from the emergency that had called her from the ward, she'd be pleased to find the child sleeping naturally.

Vivie efficiently changed sheets and placed Betsey in a fresh gown all without waking her. She loved the crisp smell of the fresh linen and took a deep breath. She could rest for just a moment. She leaned against the wall, closed her eyes and amused herself by picturing some wicked little spell to cast on the derelict doctor who'd left no patient instructions. Some simple spell her Druid ability could easily perform. Warts and boils were too easy. Could she possibly shrink a certain valued male appendage?

"Nurse Field, I believe?"

The deep voice of Dr. Alecander Stratton snapped her eyes open. She pushed herself straight and faced the frowning doctor. Supercilious eyebrows raised. Aristocratic nose lifted. The director of the children's ward. Sarcastic, brilliant, imperious Dr. Alecander Stratton.

His beautifully modulated baritone sent shivering fingers tapping down her spine. She'd always been intrigued by his bare tinge of an American accent. She didn't want to hear it right now, however.

The resonating voice sounded again.

"I can't help but notice a stack of what appears to be damp towels and linen heaped on the floor beside you, Nurse. I'm sure you have an excellent explanation for relaxing instead of cleaning up such an unhygienic display. I'm perfectly willing to hear it."

Vivie snorted. A small humph, but still a snort. She watched Stratton's eyes flare as she threw back her head and answered.

"Actually I do, Doctor. This child started into convulsions from a high fever. I found no directions on her chart, so I did what I thought best." She inhaled deeply and continued. "I've been applying cloths wrung with ice water for almost an hour. The fever's broken and she's now fallen into a nearly normal sleep, as you can see."

Stratton fixed his cold gaze on her like a swooping eagle pinning its prey before pouncing. His steel grey eyes had yellow rings around the iris. The eyes of a predator. Those intimidating eyes made it simple for him to terrorize any new and insecure nurse.

Vivie was neither.

“You’re telling me you took action on your own, Nurse Field? Are you not still a nurse in training?”

“Correct, Doctor. There was no one to consult.”

Not the fawning answer he expected, judging from the still elevated eyebrows. Doubtless the man was accustomed to female adulation. Stratton was an impressive male, somewhat over six feet, slim and elegant even in his conventional doctor’s coat. The build and grace of a seventeenth-century duelist. Dark hair, straight and abundant, which he wore severely brushed back. A formal face, resembling old drawings of a Medici. With those incredible eyes. And somehow an air about him hinting there were interesting depths under that controlled façade.

A wolf in a white coat, she thought when she’d first seen him lecturing to the probationary nurses. But not a marauder. Was there such a thing as an ascetic wolf?

Vivie battled her temper, always prone to erupt when faced with bureaucratic stupidity. She focused her mind and checked his aura. It flickered an unrelenting grey. Dark, with no luminosity at all. The color of controlled anger. She resisted the temptation to probe. No need, actually. It didn’t require her Druid powers to know perfectly well what he was thinking.

Stratton’s eyes narrowed as he started to speak and then wheeled and seized the child’s chart. He glared at Vivie, then looked around the ward and saw no one.

“Your attitude is hardly conciliatory, Nurse Field, but I concede you were sincere and did what needed to be done. We’ll not count this as disobedience to the hospital’s directives, although it’s a shame Matron had to be away.”

He grabbed the little girl’s chart and wrote on it, then handed the chart to her.

“There, this now specifies medicine you can administer if her fever mounts.”

She watched him stride down the ward, checking each child’s chart. Twice with a pat on the head for the sick child. He stopped once, frowning even more ferociously, as he paused and wrote something on the chart he held. Doubtless another patient of the careless Doctor Wheeler Vivie longed to chastise.

Dr. Stratton wheeled and marched off. His aura flickering now to deep blue with a bit of lighter blue on the edges. Just a dim streak of red. That and his vigorous stride both proclaimed the anger he fought to control. Anger at her or at Dr. Wheeler? Probably both.

Vivie pushed a stray hair back under her nurse’s cap and let out a breath she hadn’t realized she was holding. She turned to make sure the little girl was still in her healing sleep.

Maybe she should reconsider the objective of her ire a little. Not that Stratton annoyed her as much as Wheeler. But it would be a pleasure to wish a small wart on Dr. Stratton’s straight and perfect nose. Near the top of the bridge, or beside one of his nostrils? She could do that easily. It would be simple and so satisfying.

Yet true Druids never performed magic unless it was helpful. She giggled. Maybe she could justify the act on the grounds a wart might temper his conceit in his unusually handsome appearance.

Not really the proper venue for her Druid abilities, though. She could hear her twin sister Kate chattering in her mind and telling her to behave herself. She grinned, pulled the covers over Betsy, felt her forehead one last time and went to the child in the next bed.

She needed to remember how much she learned every day at London Hospital. All she had to do was keep out of trouble while she absorbed all the information she could. To supplement and enhance her own Druid knowledge.

A marriage of the two types of medicine was her long-held goal, its shining promise carrying her through all the drudgery. If she'd only brought some of her Druid medicine tonight she could have easily brought down the child's fever. Artemesia, feverfew, or lemon balm would have worked quickly. With a soft sigh, she picked up the next child's chart and began to read the directions. At least this time they were complete.

She'd soon be able to leave these impossibly authoritarian halls. If she were careful to stay out of Dr. Stratton's path.

After she'd checked each child, she inhaled deeply and walked to the window. Looking down on the busy London streets always diverted her from her problems. More and more motorcars were on the roads now that the Great War was over. A little fog swirled around the tops of lampposts but had already drifted too high to obstruct the car's headlamps. London at night was more beautiful than by day. But then most cities were. She sniffed, but on the second floor with closed windows she couldn't distinguish the petrol smell. Just as well, as part of her Druid heritage included finely tuned senses.

She turned to go back to the first bed in the ward and inspect each child's condition once again.

As she spun around, another white-coated figure loomed at the door of the ward. Had Dr. Stratton come back? Her heart lurched a little at the thought, but no, although this was definitely a doctor, it was not Dr. Stratton. He was taller, more fair and more importantly, he was smiling. Definitely not Stratton.

A handsome blond god came up to her with his hand outstretched.

"Miss Field? I've been wanting to meet you, but somehow our paths haven't crossed. I'm an admirer of yours. I understand you're the most conscientious nurse London Hospital has had for some time. My name is Dr. Stephen Lovernios."

Vive caught her breath as she looked up at him. His hair was an unusual shade of reddish gold. Beautiful and distinctive, but it was his name that triggered a response she simply had to verify.

"Son of the fox," she said simply, fixing her eyes on his.

His gaze glittered a startling blue, a hint of something she couldn't quite decipher in their depths. She could not pick up his aura, but then, she didn't always see them.

"Don't you think that an unusual statement, Nurse Field? Why would you say such a thing?"

She laughed in delight, as his twinkling eyes gave him away. "You know, don't you? Lovernios means 'son of the fox'. A name revered in Druid history."

His smile blazoned across his face.

"You are a Druid. I so hoped you were. I looked up your name in the hospital roster and you must admit Viviane is not a usual name either. Also a powerful name in Druid history. Are you what I hope you are, Miss Viviane Field?"

"What makes you think such a thing, Dr. Lavornios? Aside from my unusual name?"

She doubted her smile was completely in check.

He grinned one of the most attractive grins she'd ever seen.

"You often argue for less drastic medication. Am I right? Please tell me I am." He looked anxiously at her. "I'll go away quietly if I'm wrong."

She let her full smile out. "You're right, Doctor. I'm indeed a Druid and I can't tell you how glad I am to make your acquaintance. There are so few of us around anymore."

He took one of her hands and held it lightly.

"As I came in Dr. Stratton was leaving with a thundercloud of a face."

Vivie looked up at him. He really was a magnificent male, well over six feet, broad-shouldered and with a smile that would render most females incoherent. Warm cobalt eyes fixed on her, urging her to put all her confidence in him. She did not, however, intend to discuss one doctor with another. She let her hands rest in his a few seconds and then pulled free.

"Dr. Stratton and I don't always agree, but he is known to be a superlative doctor."

A chagrined expression chased across his face as he hastened to reassure her. "Of course he is. That's acknowledged. But I know he can be a trifle dictatorial. I would hate to have my new friend, my lovely new friend, upset in any way."

Vivie drew back a little from the delight of finding another Druid. It was too soon for personal remarks. She and Kate had learned early to distrust appreciation based on their striking appearance.

Dr. Lavornios hesitated, evidently sensitive enough to pick up her mood.

"I hope I'll see you often around the hospital, Nurse Field."

He smiled his warm smile, then quietly went to check his patient and just as quietly left the ward.

Vivie watched him go. A fellow Druid! And a most handsome and charismatic one. How very fascinating. Life at London was suddenly abounding in remarkable

possibilities. She smiled as she tucked the sheet more tightly around the child asleep in the bed beside her.

* * * * *

The following day Vivie sat in the student lounge. Not really a lounge, but a drab cheerless room with uncushioned and uncomfortable chairs. where students could supposedly rest. Should she read more of the book in her hand, or talk to Kate?

"Kate," she whispered, "I need you beside me. Conversing mentally sometimes isn't enough."

Vivie welcomed her twin's consoling murmur. A sudden desire to physically embrace her twin almost sent her head to her knees. Thank the Goddess the two of them could communicate so easily.

Since she wanted to pursue medical knowledge and Kate her violin studies, they'd together made the decision to separate for a while.

She moved over to a corner chair where the light streamed through the window. She'd submerged herself in a book on anatomy when she heard Dr. Stratton's distinctive voice. Really amazing how the bare sound of that resonant timbre made her shiver. What was he doing in the student lounge?

"Nurse Field. Might I ask how long you're planning on reading that particular book? I want to check out a reference and the librarian tells me you have the book I need."

The man was a menace. A definite irritation.

She pasted a sweet smile on her face, as she looked up at him. She absolutely wouldn't jump to her feet as she suspected most of her classmates would. She was not on duty.

"My plans are not as important as yours, I'm certain, Doctor. I'll try to hurry."

She made little attempt to disguise her sarcasm and his heavy eyebrows quirked. Again.

"And what chapter are you reading so assiduously, Nurse Field?"

Vivie pushed a lock of hair off her forehead.

"The second chapter on circulation. I find it fascinating."

His slashing eyebrows went even higher.

"I'm surprised. That's a complicated subject."

The idea of the wart grew more tempting by the minute. A bigger wart. Really big. Hideous.

"I enjoy learning, Doctor."

Her words were so curt as to cause him to flush, whether from annoyance or the realization he'd insulted her, she didn't know. Or care.

"Indeed," he answered. He turned to leave but she put out her hand.

“Please, Doctor, take the book. It’s well known a doctor’s time is much more important than a nurse’s.”

She could feel his eyes following her as she moved smoothly toward the door. Let him. She giggled under her breath. He didn’t know how close he’d come to having that handsome face of his disfigured.

“No, of course I won’t really do it,” she murmured to Kate. “I’m not that stupid. Not quite.”

She absorbed Kate’s answering giggle and grinned.

She must learn to get along with Dr. Stratton. He could easily make it difficult for her to get her nursing degree. She was so close to her objective. Druid medicine had so much to offer. Should she consider bringing along a few of her herbal potions when on floor duty? Purely for emergency use?

It was a shame a conventional doctor like Stratton would never understand her aspirations. Nor would he ever appreciate her Druid gifts. He would always be antagonistic to her dearest beliefs. Best to stay out of his way.

It shouldn’t be too hard to avoid the dratted man. He carried other responsibilities beside the children’s ward. And if she did happen to meet him, certainly she could learn to smile her sweetest and go on her way.

He possessed the power to influence her future. If she displeased him again, she doubted she’d welcome the consequences.

Chapter Two

Her good resolutions were as inadequate as a puff of wind.

The third encounter, or catastrophic clash to be more accurate, occurred after Vivie finished lecturing herself severely. She'd treat Dr. Stratton with respect if she ran into him again. Acknowledge him as a superior doctor, as well as her superior. After all, she had great pride in her abilities. She should afford him the same courtesy.

She forgot to count in fate.

On night duty again the next evening, she looked around the children's ward as she entered. The lights were low and the ward seemed more welcoming than in the sometimes blatant daylight. At night the ward didn't seem so coldly sterile. The usual hospital smells of disinfectant and soapy cleanliness were still there, of course, but tonight they seemed more comforting than disagreeable. She saw a vase of roses on Matron's desk and welcomed their delicate fragrance. Any perfume in the air helped in this often chilly atmosphere.

She picked up the chart on the first patient and her good mood faded. Fires of Beltane! Dr. Wheeler hadn't come in to update his charts. Again.

The Matron scurried around the other end of the ward, dealing with a very sick child. Now she hurried as fast as she could to Vivie.

"Nurse Field, I'm going to go find a doctor. This youngster needs more medicine and I want some dispensed immediately. She'll be all right 'til I get back."

Matron hurried out and Vivie started on her rounds. After last night she hated to be alone, although she'd found it not uncommon in such a busy hospital. Especially when a negligent doctor left his duties to the nurses. And then, emergencies often changed the rules.

She'd only checked two patients when she heard sobbing. Low, desperate, wrenching sobs. She hurried to a woman with her head lowered to a boy in the bed, with one hand clutching the child's small limp hand. Pale hair with a few grey streaks fell in wisps around her tear-streaked face. The mite of a child beside her writhed under his covers. Vivie guessed he wasn't much over three years old.

Vivie's throat clenched as the distraught woman by the bed caught her sleeve.

"He hurts so badly, nurse. I can't stand his suffering like this. My other son died with just such pain. Please, please help me."

She caught both Vivie's hands in supplication.

Vivie mentally reeled back as her feelings were lacerated by the abject terror the woman projected. One detriment to being a nurse was this piercing sympathy her Druid heritage demanded of her. She took the woman's hand and smoothed it.

"I'll do what I can," she said softly.

What a disaster, to be forced to act on her own two nights running.

Just so the disaster didn't involve Dr. Stratton.

She moved over to the bed where the little boy lay, his eyes closed as he jerked in his bed and then screamed.

Vivie quickly looked at his chart. As she'd suspected, the child was Dr. Wheeler's patient. What on earth possessed the blasted man? She couldn't waste time with wondering, although she'd like to do even more than she'd first suggested to Kate. Maybe a big boil where he'd rub against it constantly.

She leaned over the boy. She gently felt for the obvious points of discomfort, eliciting another scream as she prodded his abdomen. He was suffering an obstruction of the bowels and needed either an immediate flushing or a powerful laxative. Preferably both. She didn't dare do anything without a doctor's directive, but she'd give him a little Druid medicine for pain to relax him while she summoned help.

Thank heavens she'd decided to bring a few of her own herbal remedies. Although she'd struggled with the decision. Now she faced just the emergency she'd feared. She quickly went to the closet where she'd stored a few supplies and chose a vial of solution distilled from leaves of the hops plant. Putting several drops in a glass of water, she urged the child to drink it. An anti-spasmodic, it should help him temporarily with the pain.

She put her arms around the distraught mother and waited with her. The child's screams stopped, although he still thrashed restlessly. The mother, beside herself with gratitude and relief, seized Vivie's hands and kissed them.

"You're a good lady, Nurse. Dr. Wheeler said he'd meet us here but he never came. My Robbie suffers so much pain. I can't thank you enough."

"I think your boy will do well for the time being. I'll go find a doctor as soon as I possibly can. Robbie still needs proper medical attention."

"Really, Nurse Field? I'm surprised you can't take over the whole ward yourself."

The sarcastic deep voice could belong to no one but Dr. Stratton. Did the annoying man follow her around looking for ways she'd gotten herself in trouble?

She threw her shoulders back and tried to keep her expression impassive.

"I'm glad you're here, Doctor. This child needs immediate assistance."

Dr. Stratton moved to the bedside, felt the child's forehead, took his pulse and then palpitated the boy's stomach.

"And what is your expert diagnosis, Nurse? I'm sure you have one."

Vivie knew she flushed to the top of her head. She felt the heat spread over her chest and up her ears, but she answered with deliberation.

"I think it's an obstruction of the bowels. Do you agree, Dr. Stratton?"

Now he flushed and she knew with delight she'd gotten under his skin. Before he could answer the mother gushed out her gratitude. And demolished Vivie.

"Nurse has been so kind. She gave Robbie some medicine and he calmed down almost immediately. I'm ever so grateful to her. She's a wonderful nurse."

Stratton picked up the child's chart and scrutinized it. When he looked up, his glance revealed anger tempered by a little perplexity.

"Do you deliberately look for ways to antagonize me, Nurse Field? I imagine you're aware there is no pain medication on the chart."

"It's not deliberate, Doctor."

She looked him straight in the eye. She had no intention of justifying herself by mentioning Dr. Wheeler once again had let a parent and patient down. Dr. Stratton must be well aware. Probably Wheeler was in even more trouble than she.

From his black expression and drawn eyebrows she felt her own situation disintegrating rapidly. She fought down temptation to dip into his mind. She wanted to play this scene out on her own. Her rule was always to stay out of minds unless truly necessary. Another imperative she and Kate decided on. Right after their Druid mother scolded them for being too free with their powers.

"Might I be so bold as to inquire what you gave the child?" Dr. Stratton's polite and clipped words sounded as cold as the ice he'd caught her using last time he checked the ward.

She again looked at him directly. "A few drops of a distillation of the leaves of the hops plant. It's perfectly safe. I brewed the medicine myself."

Vivie never saw a man look so shocked. A nurse bringing her own remedies into the hospital and then admitting it must be raising the back hairs on his handsome head.

For a long moment he tried to stare her down. When he didn't succeed he asked, again in his overly polite tone, "And where did you get the formula?"

"I'm a Druid, Dr. Stratton. I'm well trained in Druid lore and medicine. I'm also an adept psychic."

She threw the last in just to disconcert him.

"Ooooh," breathed Robbie's mother. Fascination took over her worry, at least for the moment. "I didn't think none of them Druids was around anymore."

Vivie couldn't stop her smile. "Not as many of us as I'd like," she said.

Stratton did not appear amused. "I can hardly believe what I'm hearing. Druid medicine is largely herbal, as I understand it, but not to be compared with modern medical knowledge. However that's not the point here, as you well know, nurse. I'll see you in my office tomorrow, Miss Field. Two o'clock."

Vivie watched him stride away, his elegantly slim figure as erect as usual, projecting power and authority with every inch.

"Doctor Stratton," she called after him.

He wheeled around, surprise and shock on his face.

“Will you please send another doctor to take care of Robbie?”

Stratton’s face turned scarlet, his caged anger almost visible.

He clipped out his words. “I intended to. Most of us here take our duties seriously, Miss Field.”

She imagined she’d just hammered the last nail in her coffin. She’d be dismissed from the hospital as of her meeting with him tomorrow. Still, she’d had to make sure somebody took care of Robbie. She stopped at the child’s bedside before going on with her rounds. Right now he rested easily.

“Blessed be,” she murmured, tucking his blankets around him as his mother beamed at her.

Her uneasiness ran deep. Yet looking back over the incidents with Dr. Stratton, she’d felt no choice but to help in the only way she knew. What a shame both incidents occurred with the same doctor.

She took great pride in being a Druid and would never deny its obligations. Still she couldn’t help but regret these episodes would doubtless mean the end of her formal training.

She wouldn’t lower herself to try to shift the blame to Dr. Wheeler.

She allowed herself a small groan. She didn’t look forward to her meeting with the formidable Dr. Stratton. She could handle herself, but she certainly wished he weren’t so dratted steely.

Did he ever, ever smile?

Chapter Three

Realizing her interview with Dr. Stratton coincided with her day off greatly pleased Vivie. She could make sure she looked her best. In her room at the home of the Duke and Duchess of Lambden, she tried on three different outfits. Then she plopped down on the nearest chair, just as Grandmama Kathryn came to the door of her bedroom.

Vivie threw up her hands in despair.

"I can't decide what to wear," she wailed.

The Duchess of Lambden wandered in, a rather puzzled smile on her classic features. Now in her seventies, she and the Duke wanted only to devote themselves to their family and cared little for society. They delighted in ignoring the social scene and concentrating on their children and grandchildren. Vivie's father Lance, the couple's fourth and last son, had given them their beloved granddaughters, as well as three grandsons. They loved all their grandchildren, but Kate and Vivie were the only girls in the family and doubly special.

"Not at all like you, love," murmured the Duchess. "Generally you don't care a bit."

"I know." Vivie chewed on one thumbnail as she smiled at her grandmother. "I generally don't. But today is my dismissal interview and for some insane reason I want Dr. Stratton to remember me as something more than a vexing problem."

The duchess perched on the side of Vivie's bed. "You realize you don't have to accept a dismissal, don't you?"

Vivie shrugged. "You mean tell him I'm the granddaughter of the ducal couple who provide the funding for the wing he heads? Not likely, grandmama. What if he apologized and tried to curry favor? I'd hate to see him in such an unsavory role."

"But he's bound to find out sometime, then he'll be horribly embarrassed and despise you for deceiving him."

Vivie sighed and chewed the other thumbnail. "I know. I hoped to get through training on my own merits. If I'm dismissed it will also be on my own account. Anyway, I might never see him again after I leave the hospital."

Grandmama Kathryn laughed. "I think you're wrong. London society is too small for you to avoid forever a man who is on his way up in it."

Vivie raised startled eyes to the Duchess' smiling ones.

"Really? He's not only an American but has no connections, at least as far as I know. I expect never to see him again."

The Duchess grinned. "Society has changed a good deal since the Great War. Haven't you noticed that with all the new motorcars and international business connections society is more mobile? Anyone with brilliance can make their way in it if

they choose. Dr. Stratton is certainly brilliant and I think he plans to succeed. But since you'll never see him again it is a problem what to wear. Yes, you make perfect sense."

Vivie rose and kissed the papery cheek of the Duchess. Still vivacious in word and action, her snow-white hair made a striking contrast with her dark eyebrows. Like her father before her, Vivie wondered how the Duchess ever managed to produce four sons who seemed twice her size.

"You remind me so much of your namesake, Grandmama. Kate never lets me get away with anything either. Now what do you think of this dark green suit, coupled with my frilliest white blouse? The one with the little round collar? Thank heavens the war years slimmed down fashions. I would hate to wear the blousey leg-o-mutton sleeves of thirty years ago."

"An excellent choice, love. I'll lend you my emerald earrings if you'd like. They're small enough he mightn't know they're real. They do match your eyes so nicely."

Vivie pirouetted in front of her mirror, holding the suit to her.

"No, thank you, Grandmama. For some reason I want to be just me this afternoon. If I have to leave the hospital I'll go as I entered. Nurse Field instead of Lord Lance Dellafield's daughter Viviane."

She tossed her head, happily convinced she'd chosen the right costume. For some reason green always gave her confidence.

Vivie blushed as her grandmother smiled in a knowing way before leaving the room. Darned if she hadn't always been surrounded by brilliant women. A blessed handicap.

She shrugged and turned around once again to be sure her skirt molded without a wrinkle to her hips. She grinned with pleasure skirts were now short enough to show a little more of her legs. She twirled once and watched the skirt flare into fullness toward the bottom. Definitely adding to its daring, a very nice plus. Her shoes were a bit high-heeled for an interview, but she'd hated the practical clunky shoes of wartime Britain.

Dr. Alecander Stratton would not find her begging to retain her job.

She sat at her dressing table, determined to brush her auburn hair until it glistened. She even remembered to add a little of her favorite jasmine scent, which she certainly never wore when nursing. She intended to be almost every inch a female, only a few inches a nurse when she went for her dismissal interview.

* * * * *

With the interview set for two o'clock, Dr. Stratton sat musing. He hadn't yet determined what to say to the exasperating Nurse Field, although he knew he didn't really want to dismiss her. She was a gifted nurse, as ascertained by every report on her he could gather. Still, she'd violated too many rules of hospital discipline. What kind of wards would there be if nurses could bring in their own remedies and administer them, for God's sake? She'd been unusually provoked, he agreed and he'd met with Dr.

Wheeler and dismissed him from the staff of London Hospital an hour ago. This was far from the first or even second time Wheeler neglected his duty.

Now he guessed he'd be forced to dismiss Nurse Field also. Dr. Wheeler would be no loss to the profession, but Nurse Field would.

But she'd also been impertinent, verging on disrespectful. He didn't take kindly to any of his staff having her kind of defiant attitude, no matter her talent.

And she was a Druid. Were Druids good or bad? He admitted he knew little about Druids, although he thought they were Celtic in origin. Perhaps that would explain the startling green eyes. He just didn't know enough about Druids. Her elegant and beautiful face showed a purity of ancestry of some kind. Possibly the Druid line came down untouched no matter the class. One thing he knew, she couldn't be from the upper classes of the stratified British society.

Her name was listed as Viviane. Unusual, but hardly a society name. In fact he'd never seen the name before. Perhaps a Druid name?

Yet what upper class girl would choose the dirty and exhausting work of nursing? Her accent also marked her from the higher rung of society, but she was clever enough to have picked it up. Still, her features were as stunning as those of the Greek goddess of love. She puzzled him.

He'd been called handsome, actually he used the fact to his advantage almost without thinking. And yet his ancestry was certainly not distinguished. Far from it. So aristocratic looks didn't always mean aristocracy. He'd been told he projected that favored appearance also. And teaching himself the upper class accent had been quite easy.

He smiled at the thought. Miss Field didn't have to be anything but what she appeared to be. An individualistic girl who would flout authority every time she felt she knew better than a doctor. He had no choice but to let her go.

What a shame. Not only an excellent nurse but he enjoyed looking at her. Rather taller than average, which he liked. Slim but yet curved. With beautiful skin of such creamy tones one longed to reach out and stroke the silken surface.

When his secretary announced her he stood as she entered and motioned her to a chair. His breath caught in his suddenly tight chest. Dear God, she was gorgeous. He'd never seen her in anything but the stiff skirts of a nurse, her hair slicked back and caught in a knot under her little nurse's cap. He only hoped he got his breath back in time to behave with a modicum of manners.

Her glorious auburn hair, a dark auburn, flashed copper highlights in the rays of the sun streaming through his windows. She wore a perky dab of a hat with three long green feathers. Those impossibly emerald eyes looked at him with her usual directness, completely unsettling his resolve to dismiss her quickly and get the unpleasant matter behind him. He'd like to keep her here all day. And into the night. A long, long night.

Her suit, even with the current dropped chemise waist, still revealed slim curves the nurse's uniform only suggested. Her breasts looked to be just the right size, a

handful but not too large to properly, or preferably not so properly, caress. Worst of all, the middle of her upper lip just barely protruded over her lower lip. For some reason he found this unbearably erotic, making him long to catch her mouth under his. The intensity of his instant attraction startled him to the point of almost babbling. He barely managed to keep his mouth shut, although he never took his eyes from her.

Hell's blazes but he must be losing his mind. This woman was a walking disaster to a doctor aiming for the highest rungs of London's society. He doubted if most of the class he meant to dominate had ever heard of Druids.

Fortunately she didn't seem to notice his bizarre reaction.

She seemed to glide into the room. A smooth, graceful walk. Did the blasted woman have any physical imperfections at all?

"You wished to see me, I believe, Dr. Stratton."

She settled with grace in the chair he motioned her toward, crossing legs as long as any man's dream. He forced his concentration entirely on the business at hand and cleared his throat.

"You're intelligent enough to know why I requested this meeting, Miss Field. However, I'd like to know if we can compromise. You're an exceptionally adept nurse. Is there a possibility you would swear to obey the rules of the hospital from now on?"

He leaned back, astonished at his own words. They definitely were not the ones he'd planned on saying.

A little smile flitted around those luscious lips.

"Very clever, Dr. Stratton. And no, I'm afraid not. If I were caught again in the predicaments you hold against me, I would likely do the same thing. The only difference is I might take action a little quicker."

The smile now extended to her eyes, as if she were anxious to see how he'd respond to her outrageous statement.

He steepled his hands.

"You must know your herbal treatment of the child wasn't necessary. Pain from bowel obstructions sometimes recedes a little in between the periodic griping. I imagine the child would have felt some relief without your regrettably hurried reaction."

This time he could see he'd truly upset her. Her emerald eyes flashed with disdain and she half rose from her chair before sitting again.

"I expect no less from any traditional doctor," she said. "Now if you would just get the formalities over with and dismiss me from the hospital staff I will take my leave of you, Dr. Stratton."

Intrigued with how her anger intensified her beauty and wanting to somehow pierce her aloofness, he stalled for time.

"Perhaps we can find a solution satisfactory to us both."

He found they were staring at each other for a long moment of silence. She bit her fetching upper lip with her teeth and started to speak. Just then they heard the voice of

Stratton's secretary shouting and they both started a little and turned toward the office door.

"You can't go in there, Doctor. He's having a private interview."

Even as the secretary's voice mounted the door crashed open and Dr. Wheeler stood in the doorway, his eyes wild, his hair disheveled and his shaking right hand holding a gun. He pointed it directly on Stratton, who'd come around his desk and couldn't be more vulnerable.

Chapter Four

Dr. Stratton stood still, his anger radiating and somehow making him seem more formidable than the intruder. At least to Vivie. Wheeler was not intimidated, in fact he gave a small shout of delight as he spotted Vivie.

“Both of you here at once! I can get you both. The Judas nurse who reported me and the doctor who won’t give me another chance. I can kill both of you!”

Stratton made a move in Vivie’s direction, obviously trying to get in front of her. Wheeler waved the gun with a terrifying lack of caution.

“I’m not stupid, Stratton. Keep away from her while I decide which one to shoot first. I think you, Doctor, since you might try to rush me if I don’t. Not that anything is going to do either of you any good.”

Vivie sat motionless. Two voices were talking to Vivie inside her head. One was Kate, almost screaming a warning to be careful. The other voice belonged to her grandmother Viviane. Even more skilled in Druid magic than Vivie’s mother Morgan, Viviane quietly advised her namesake.

“Your best chance, love, is to force him to drop the gun. Anything else is too risky. You can do this easily, Vivie and then trust Dr. Stratton to follow up.”

Wheeler’s eyes were on Stratton as he aimed the gun at his heart. Stratton’s dark strength showed no fear whatsoever. Only blazing anger.

Vivie squirmed in her seat, mostly fearing Stratton might make a disastrous move before she could act. Using every ounce of Druid power she possessed, she willed Wheeler’s hand muscles to relax. It took only seconds. She beamed with pride as Wheeler, with a look combining amazement and terror, stared at his fingers uncurling from the gun handle as the weapon dropped to the carpet. His hand stuck straight out, totally without power to pick up the weapon.

Stratton, his face reflecting his obvious astonishment, reacted as quickly as Vivie hoped. He dashed forward and scooped up the gun while Wheeler stood gaping at his useless hand.

“Do I have to keep this pointed at you to make you behave, Wheeler? You know I can’t let this go unremarked, but if you show contrition I’ll make it as easy for you as I can with the police. What on earth possessed you, Wheeler?”

Wheeler seemed to fold in on himself to a lesser image of a man. Then he started to shriek.

“It’s that bitch over there. I’ve heard she’s a Druid and now I know she’s a Druid witch. She turned her evil magic on me. No way would I let the gun fall unless it was some kind of spell. I would have shot you both.”

Stratton looked almost pityingly at the raving man. He now held the gun directly on Wheeler, never taking his eyes from him as he spoke to Vivie.

"Kindly ask my secretary to call some guards and then the police, Miss Field."

Wheeler stopped yelling and seemed to wilt again. The smell of his sweaty fear permeated the room as he realized he'd essentially ruined himself. No hospital would ever hire him. He curled into himself and mumbled as he began to shake. As pitiful sight as Vivie had ever seen, she said a Druid prayer for him.

Vivie did as Stratton asked and then returned to the room.

Stratton glanced at her, his quick look holding dismay along with a hint of admiration.

"I expected you to stay out of the room, Miss Field. While I think our friend here has given up his ambition to annihilate us, I'd rather you keep out of danger."

"I'd rather stay," Vivie said. She knew there'd be no more danger from Wheeler. His aura projected darkness, the color of midnight, shot through with yellow streaks. Black enough to make one wonder about his mental stability.

No one spoke for a moment, until Wheeler started to sob.

"I think I've lost my mind. I knew heroin was addictive, but not as quickly as it grabbed me. Please, Stratton, let me have just a little. I haven't gotten any since you took me off ward duty. I'm going crazy."

He'd turned a nasty shade of grey, both in his skin color and his aura. The smell of fear grew stronger as he quivered from head to foot. Vivie and Stratton shot knowing glances at each other.

"So that's why you've been neglecting your duties," mused Stratton. "George, I'm so sorry. You know better than most how hard it is to shake such a habit. Whatever possessed you?"

Wheeler suddenly sat down on the nearest chair, his head submerged in his hands. "I merely wanted extra energy at first. The night shift is hard, I needed help. Surely you can understand that."

Stratton's soft voice showed pity, but no forgiveness. "I'm afraid I really don't."

The hospital orderlies appeared at the door and Stratton motioned them to escort Wheeler from the room. Sobbing and shaking, totally pathetic. And to think he, an intelligent man, was responsible for his own ruin.

There was silence in the room after the orderlies led Wheeler away. Vivie turned to go, when Stratton spoke to her again.

"I know this will get out sooner or later, but I'd appreciate it if you wouldn't discuss the matter with anyone, Nurse Field."

His voice was subdued and Vivie didn't think he meant to insult her. Still he had.

"Of course, Dr. Stratton. I didn't intend to." Her voice stiffened as she wheeled to leave.

“Oh Lord,” he said. “I really didn’t mean to offend you. Just an automatic response to a miserable situation. I’m trying to figure out what to do with him and I’m reacting poorly. You, on the other hand, were completely admirable throughout his disgusting display. I truly hate to let you go from the hospital staff. I can’t in all conscience keep you on at ward duty, but I find you’re only two months short of your nurse’s certificate. Would you consent to spend those two months in the hospital clinic? It’s hard duty but you’ll be surrounded by doctors and too busy to do anything but follow orders. I guarantee the clinic doctors will work you to exhaustion.”

His teasing tone and the tiny grin in his eyes took most of the sting out of his words.

Vivie stared at him. Just when she thought him impossible he redeemed himself a little. Actually she’d love clinic duty. True, they were always rushed to the point of collapse but she wouldn’t mind. She’d get a chance to learn much more in such a busy place.

She could hardly believe it, but she thought Dr. Stratton was actually smiling. A small smile, but still it lightened his ascetic features and made him almost likeable. And even more handsome. Funny, when he smiled, his forehead smoothed out and the wrinkle between his eyes disappeared.

She found her voice.

“Thank you, Doctor. I would indeed appreciate the opportunity.”

“Don’t thank me,” he said gruffly. “You’re too good a nurse to turn out without her certificate.” He held the door open for her, smiling at her as she turned to leave.

“Oh, by the way, what do you think made Dr. Wheeler drop the gun? I suppose some sort of nervous reaction to the heroin, but I’m surprised. A most unusual reaction.”

She looked at him with renewed disgust.

“Oh, for Merlin’s sake! What does it take to make you believe in Druid power? I did cast a spell. It wasn’t even hard! I told you I could.”

This time she whirled out of the room. She imagined he stared after her. Probably regretting he’d given her permission to assist in the clinic. He certainly would never believe her, so he must think her completely crazy. Although she would never cover up or lie about her precious Druid gifts.

She sighed. So few understood those gifts. Certainly Dr. Alexander Stratton would never try.

Maybe the next time she’d peek into the layers of his mind and find out what blocked his understanding. No, it would be a totally unwarranted invasion of his privacy.

She pulled at a lock of her hair, twining it slowly around one of her fingers. She would just have to hope one of her insights would help explain the stark contradictions she sensed so strongly in the intriguing Dr. Stratton.

Chapter Five

Vivie found working in the clinic just as draining as Dr. Stratton prophesied. She also found she loved it. Both because of the sheer amount of labor and also for the variety of experience. She worked long hours and treasured every hour. Exactly what she'd hoped for when she started nursing. She knew, knew in her heart, she was a good nurse both in ordinary medicine as well as with her Druid knowledge. She relished being able to prove herself.

Both body and mind informed her when Dr. Stratton periodically dropped in and chatted for a short while with the doctor on duty. Some secret part of her, a part deep inside, knew the instant he came through the doors of the clinic. She didn't need to even look up. Her whole being seemed to reverberate as if soft chimes were ringing in her ear. She didn't want to even think about what such a weird reaction might mean. She'd no time at all for pondering such nonsense.

She felt pleasantly certain he would find it hard to fault her work and after about the third week when the frequency of his calls fell away, she grinned to herself. Even though she missed the exhilaration bubbling through her when she sensed his presence.

She'd passed his exacting standards and he must no longer be worried he'd permitted her to keep nursing. She assured herself she was delighted he no longer checked on her.

She couldn't know he'd looked up Miss Viviane Field's application for entrance to nursing school. He found nothing there to help explain the contradictions puzzling him. Under schooling she'd put the words, 'by my grandmothers'. No traditional schools at all. Unusual, as most candidates for admission tried to list any impressive fact they could. Some of them even falsified a prestigious school. She must have been accepted on the basis of her verbal interview and that he could understand. She'd impress anyone. Although her beauty might not have swayed him if he'd been on the entrance committee, the shining splendor of her appearance and personality would have influenced almost anyone else.

Perhaps the grandmothers kept her at home wanting to protect a girl of her beauty. One thing he now knew for certain. She'd gone to none of the expensive girl's schools most debutantes attended. He'd not expected she had, but he'd hoped for a clue to whether her upbringing was as middle-class as he thought. His check of her background left him clueless, but as he watched her go about the exhausting, often debasing tasks in the clinic, it renewed his conviction his first assessment must be correct. She was an exceptionally bright girl from a middle-class background. Probably upper-middle-class, but definitely not top of the trees. Wanting to get ahead on her own.

He knew quite a few girls from the best rung of society and none could begin to contend with Vivie Field's daily routine. Nor would any of them ever consider such menial work. He could be positive his assessment was correct.

One day in the first week after she'd been assigned to the clinic Vivie found herself looking up from changing a child's bandages to find the good-looking, six-foot-three Dr. Lovernios smiling at her, his eyes tinged with humor as well as friendship. She easily smiled back. He reminded her of a big friendly puppy she'd loved as a child.

"Miss Field? Have you been promoted or demoted to our clinic?" His voice sounded warm and pleasant, although not as deeply thrilling as Dr. Stratton's. "I heard you were here. I'm glad you joined us."

He held out his hand and she automatically took it.

Vivie looked at him carefully. Today his aura glowed with the same color as his beautiful hair. An unusual reddish gold. Could he be adept enough to project the aura he wanted? She didn't know him well enough to judge, but as a Druid he might.

"I've been thinking about your name, Doctor. Lovernios dates before Roman times, doesn't it? A century or two, if I remember correctly. An aristocratic name, favored by Celtic kings. You must be very proud of it."

He said nothing for a long breath. Then, his eyes fastened on her the whole time, he added softly, "Yes, of course I knew. And it's also the name of many Druid bards. I've done my share of singing in my time. I think my greatest pride is in being a bard. Our Druid history will be lost unless the bards help preserve it. And your own name? Is it also passed down through your family?"

Vivie delighted in talking to someone who truly understood her.

"Viviane is my Druid grandmother's name and one I'm proud to bear. The original Viviane was a powerful Druid priestess, as you doubtless know. My own grandmother is gifted and revered for her healing ways, as is my mother. I want very much to combine the best of Druid healing with the best of modern medicine. They each have much to learn from the other."

"I agree," exclaimed Dr. Lovernios. "It would be wonderful if some place of healing offered both."

He fixed his beautiful blue gaze on her.

"I can't tell you how very pleased I am, Nurse Viviane Field, to have you in the clinic. But surely you must have some idea of what it means to find a kindred soul."

She didn't know why this made her feel somehow pressured, as he only voiced her own thoughts.

"I, too, am glad to have a new friend," she said softly.

Vivie's voice was a trifle constrained. Did Dr. Lovernios appreciate her for her own self, or her appearance? She couldn't tell yet and it put her a little on edge. A fleeting and errant thought raced through her mind. Did Dr. Alecander Stratton find her at least pretty? He'd never given the slightest sign.

Maybe sometime she should relax her own prohibitions about looking into other minds and find out what the very stern doctor was thinking. Just enough to know if he liked the way she looked.

All right, twin. I hear you and I won't.

She turned her attention back to Dr. Lovernios.

"You're within a week of your nursing certificate, Miss Field. Do you know what you plan to do next?"

Certainly she knew. She would found a clinic along the lines she envisioned to marry her two kinds of medical knowledge. She could hardly tell him so as he'd instantly wonder where she planned to get funds. She had no intention of handing out clues she came from a wealthy family. She and all her siblings owned trust funds set up by her grandparents and parents jointly.

"I plan to work in a clinic, but not here."

Dr. Lovernios looked surprised at her short answer, but said nothing else except to reiterate his pleasure at seeing her. He left her then, after adding he hoped to see her more often. His smile was warm and accentuated his stunning looks, but Vivie forgot him as soon as she turned away.

She kept on sorting the bandages into easily accessible stacks according to size. She bent her head over her task. Thank heavens she only had a week to go. Surely it would be more interesting to sort bandages in her own clinic.

A voice, deeper than that of Dr. Lovernios and instantly recognizable, spoke to her.

"I want to congratulate you on your outstanding performance in the clinic, Nurse Field. You have more than justified my faith in your abilities."

Vivie kept her eyes down for a moment, not wanting to betray her astonishment. Dr. Stratton never took time to speak casually to anyone of the staff, especially a lowly student nurse.

She raised her eyes and found Dr. Stratton smiling at her. His face changed delightfully when he smiled a full smile. The half-frown so often marring his face had disappeared. She'd thought him handsome before, although she'd despised his cold demeanor. A different man stood before her, one whose magnetism she'd suspected and found she could not discount.

But then they'd clashed at every previous encounter and she usually saw him in her mind with a scowl on his face, a little thundercloud hovering over his head. His strikingly good-looking head. His presently sunny aura was shot through with his own personal blue.

Not like her at all to be tongue-tied and she feared she colored as she realized she was simply staring at him.

He laughed, a deep attractive laugh that slammed into her stomach.

"I can see I've startled you, Nurse Field. I do know how to be pleasant, even if I seldom show it in the hospital. But you deserve congratulations, along with the certificate you'll get next week."

She finally found her voice. "Thank you, Doctor. I truly appreciate congratulations from you."

Her smile must be the first he'd seen from her also, as he started and then widened his grin.

"I admire many things about you, Nurse Field, but a hospital is hardly the place to hand out compliments. Will you let me know where you are after you finish training? I would like to keep track of you."

Astonished beyond her capacity to mask her emotions, she paused as to what to tell him. She didn't want him to know she lived with her grandparents. Not when they were the Duke and Duchess of Lambden. She'd gone to a great deal of trouble to keep that fact under wraps. The Lambden chauffeur let her off every morning four blocks from the hospital. She didn't turn round, but she could sometimes spot the long bonnet of their Renault following at a discreet distance until she entered the hospital.

She thought furiously of what to say. Surprisingly, she found she'd be glad to see him again. Especially away from the hospital.

"I don't quite know yet where I'll be. If you truly want to know what I'm doing I'll be happy to send you a message next week. This way neither of us need feel obligated, although I do most sincerely appreciate your expression of interest, Dr. Stratton. And your congratulations."

She flashed him a genuine smile. Could she possibly be wrong about the doctor? Was he not as cold-hearted and authoritarian as she'd thought? She would definitely let him know how to reach her, if only out of feminine curiosity.

Maybe she could make him smile more often. She'd like that. She'd like that very much.

* * * * *

Alec Stratton stood looking down into the shining green eyes of Vivie Field, wondering what had gotten into him. No, he knew very well what had gotten into him. He'd been unable to keep Nurse Field out of his mind since she'd looked defiantly at him and refused to compromise her beliefs. He'd known even before then she was a dedicated nurse and expected no trouble in getting her to guarantee she'd follow hospital procedures in order to keep her position and get her certificate.

He'd never experienced anything as sweetly provocative as her defiance. Emerald eyes flashing, beautiful auburn head tilted back in proud protest, her very posture daring him to try to change her mind. She was gorgeous, but then he knew many beautiful women. He didn't ask a girl out unless she was lovely.

But he demanded more than just appearance. His women must be from the top rank of society. He intended to be a doctor to the most elite of the elite and he needed a wife with impeccable lineage and connections. On the day Vivie came marching into his office expecting her dismissal, his instinctive reaction was toward her perfection. He'd never seen a more faultless candidate for his future wife. If you counted looks alone. At first he'd wondered where she found the funds for her stunning outfit. Then he'd remembered there were many clothiers who copied the best for a fraction of the price.

The girl was bright, beautiful and in no way suited to his long-range objectives. No way at all. Still he couldn't get her to stay out of his mind. Since she would soon leave the hospital perhaps he should see her at least once and find some obvious fault so he could dismiss her image. The image glowing in his mind at totally unexpected times, one refusing to grow dim.

He received a note from her about a week later. He'd scrutinized the mail every day, refusing to admit his disappointment. Now relief brought a grin to his face and his secretary wondered why that one message so pleased him.

Vivie wrote only a few lines, stating she was staying with a friend on Sloan Street and would be there for at least four days. There was nothing beside the address. Any other female he'd ever met would have added a request urging him to call on her. Vivie Fields either didn't care, or didn't care to let him know she did. His grin grew wider. Pursuing her acquaintance would be evidently up to him. Just one more detail to be added to her increasingly intriguing image.

He never gave a thought to not responding. He wrote a few lines asking to take her to dinner in two days' time, suggesting the Savoy. He called for a delivery service. He thought mail service too chancy when she was only reachable for four days. He pushed the thought away, dressing properly might be difficult for a nurse's salary. If she didn't have the correct dress for a fancy hotel dining room he wouldn't say a word. In fact he'd be delighted to find the shortcoming he sought.

Her answer again was terse, although it too came by messenger. She'd be delighted to accept the invitation, but would prefer an Italian restaurant she named, one newly opened in the Soho district.

Well, he already knew she was intelligent. No expressions of delight at an invitation doubtless unusual for her. She'd handled the clothing problem in her own way and he grinned again.

When he picked her up in a hansom cab he found her dressed in a shorter skirt than he'd ever seen on her. One flaring slightly above her calves. Her legs appeared every bit as long and gorgeous as he'd suspected. She'd cropped her hair a little and it rioted in radiant curls, hugging her head, shorter and yet somehow more provocative. Not quite the new flapper cut, but she wouldn't follow a style slavishly. She'd taken the green feathers from her hat of the other day and stuck them in a thick velvet band. The feathers tilted jauntily over her forehead, calling attention to her gorgeous emerald eyes. Her dress and matching short jacket were a pale green, of some slick material almost commanding a man to glide his hands over the sensuous softness.

He thought her very clever for dressing with such originality and allure, although he now understood why Wheeler called her a witch. Understood with a bolt of sexual longing chivvying away at his careful restraint.

The girl was any man's dream. Drat her Druid soul. Was she trying to cast a spell on him, the little vixen? Not that she'd succeed.

He took a deep breath and handed her into the cab with a flourish and a smile. She might look more alluring than he liked, but fortunately he had firm control over his male susceptibility. He definitely could resist even so captivating a female as Vivie Field.

Although he would be wise to remember he planned to see her just this once and then put her out of his mind.

She could never be for him, nor he for her.

Chapter Six

Vivie chewed on her thumbnail when she'd considered her new problem. She wanted the two doctors interested in her address knowing how to reach her and yet she didn't want either one to know her aristocratic connections. Noble blood no longer impressed people as it had been in the past, but she feared her family's was so special as to be still enticing. There'd never been many Dukes in England. Even with the leveling of society brought about by the Great War, Dukes were revered. Although titled barriers were breaking down, the wealthy still held inordinate power. Perhaps someday the world would recognize how meaningless riches or titles were in the long and repeated cycles of life, but that time hadn't arrived.

Which only proved once again how better off the world would be with Druid values. She definitely wouldn't give either one of the men the ducal address. Nor Emily's phone number. Not yet, at least.

She'd turned to Emily, one of her friends who'd rebelled against her own title, even though she was a countess by birth. Her title came down through the female line, which made it quite unusual. Emily Essex preferred her life as a sculptor. True, she signed her work with an alias rather than embarrass her starchy parents, although her fame grew steadily. Vivie hoped, as did Emily, her parents would in time be proud of their daughter's chosen life.

Emily lived in a flat on the top floor of a house on Sloan Street, with the lower two floors devoted to her sculpting. She'd often asked Vivie to move in with her and now Vivie decided to give it a try. If it worked out Vivie thought she might even stay. Her grandparents would dearly love her to reside with them forever, bless their sweet souls. But every room in their big mansion held memories of how she and Kate once reveled in visits. Perhaps if she tried a new and different location she wouldn't miss Kate quite so much.

Emily agreed to take in any messages arriving at times when Vivie stayed with her grandparents and letting her come to her home whenever she pleased. In truth Emily was delighted, viewing the whole arrangement as an enjoyable game of duping easily fooled men.

When Alec Stratton appeared to take her to dinner, Vivie introduced him to her roommate and watched his striking looks, elegant clothes and impeccable manners conquer Emily. Vivie knew she'd exaggerated Stratton's unpleasant disposition and Emily expected to dislike him on sight. So Vivie stood by and smiled as Emily, strictly unimpressible Emily, gushed over the tall, commanding doctor. Vivie thought Alec a purely delectable sight in a dark, double-breasted suit with gleaming white shirt and dark red tie. She could see herself in his polished shoes. He must have shaved for the

second time this day as no dark stubble marred his perfection as in late afternoon in the hospital. And she could smell the scent of appealing lemony aftershave he used. Yes, this civilian-doctor looked even more luscious than the one in surgical whites. Watching him smile at Emily, she fancied his lips were naturally curved in a sensuous allure.

Definitely time to head for the restaurant and other people.

She suspected her resolution was in trouble when more people made little difference. Stratton concentrated his entire attention on her, ignoring the rest of the crowded restaurant as if no others were in the room. Vivie couldn't remember feeling so cherished as a companion. He made no attempts at flirting or compliments, but every question seemed designed to probe her mind and get down to her essentials. Used to copious compliments as a way to gain her attention, she found his complete concentration charming.

"I know you are a Druid and proud of being one. Will you tell me why? I'm woefully ignorant on the subject and the hospital library didn't help me at all."

His rueful smile, plus the fact he'd tried to learn about her interests, captivated Vivie. She'd been tired for so long of men interested only in what they termed her beauty. Or whether she could possibly be talked into bed by her escort. Or sometimes sly references to her ducal grandparents.

She welcomed the chance to talk about something so dear to her as Druids. She beamed at him.

"A subject I love. You'll probably have to remind me to let you talk for a word or two if I get started. Our Druid beliefs are important. But they are gradually disappearing like the mystic mists of Avalon."

As his eyebrows arched she answered the question in his fascinated eyes.

"Avalon is where Druids ruled for a while. King Arthur was originally a Druid and if he'd stayed true to his Druid vows Britain might be quite different today. Supposedly Queen Guinevere was a devout Christian and insisted Arthur embrace her beliefs. The Druid priestesses withdrew their support and his power waned after that. They say when he died the Druids reclaimed him and his body sailed by skiff to Avalon. The mists parted to let him through."

"Now that is fascinating." Stratton stopped eating and watched her in what she didn't doubt was genuine attention.

Vivie laughed and shook her head at him. "Don't take this as fact, Dr. Stratton. Druids believe this, but our history had been passed down mostly by bards, who were often also priests. We have little written history. Recording events was forbidden, as the bards were taught the tales and sung them through the ages. Oh yes and Merlin the magician is our most famous bard. An unusually talented musician. He supposedly possessed a miraculous voice."

She smiled at him with delight at his rapt concentration. And watched his eyes darken with some emotion he didn't seem to want her to see, as he quickly smiled and urged her to tell him more. He added an important postscript.

"I'd be delighted if you used my given name. I'd very much like you to do so."

His eyes were sincere. He meant it. With her psychic powers she could usually glimpse another's hidden motives without consciously trying. His were pure. Another surprise in a surprising evening. A lovely blue aura hovered around him like a soft breeze floating in the summer air. Almost palpable. She drew back her hand even as it left her lap.

Vivie took a deep breath.

"I think that's enough about me. Tell me about where you grew up. I know someplace in America but I'm not sure where. Except you don't have a trace of the South in your voice."

"Tell me, Alec," he prompted.

"Please tell me, Alec."

He went still. She knew nothing about what was going on in his mind when he hooded his eyes. He finally unveiled them and looked directly at her.

"I have no past that's interesting. I grew up and attended all my schooling in Boston. Then I came to England. I came three years ago when America still hadn't entered the war and went directly into London Hospital. A very dull tale, as you can see."

The one she now thought of as the artificial Dr. Stratton was here in full force. In spite of his light tone she somehow suspected she'd touched on forbidden territory. Since she hadn't told him everything pertinent to her history, she could scarcely insist on his doing so.

He didn't want to discuss his past. Not knowing whether his reticence was important, she shoved it to the back of her mind to retrieve it later.

In the meantime, she needed to speak to their napkins. Both of them kept sliding off and Alec signaled the waiter for new ones. She concentrated for a few seconds and then looked up with a smile.

"There," she said. "Our napkins will now stay on our laps. They just needed to be reminded of their job."

Alec's startled look made her laugh.

"I spoke to them both. It's possible, you know. I hate to keep picking napkins from the floor."

There was a long silence. Blast, how careless could she be! She'd been enjoying his company and forgot how most people mistrusted her Druid abilities. She looked down at her plate and tackled her huge pile of fettucine.

She glanced up several minutes later to find Alec smiling at her.

"Have I missed something?" she queried.

"No, you're a delight. I never know what to expect of your whimsical mind. I think you might even believe what you're saying. What will you do when your napkin slips off your lap?"

His pewter-grey eyes were laughing at her and their allure almost made her able to ignore his skepticism. But then she never lost her temper over such minor things.

"Shall we make a bet? That our napkins stay in our laps? How about one whole penny?"

Alec laughed, a charming, ringing laugh.

"I don't think so. I can't afford such huge bets. And you can easily keep a grip on your napkin. I could easily shove mine off."

"As to the last, I don't think you can," she said quietly. "Unless you pick it up and drop it on the floor and that wouldn't be fair."

His startled look made her pretty sure he'd tried to push at his napkin and found it unbudgable. She grinned all during the long pause that followed.

He shrugged and changed the subject, a typical male trick when perplexed. He wasn't ready to face facts. Perhaps he never would be. Although a lot of little inconsistencies should be mounting in his mind. Her curiosity nearly led her to peek into his thoughts before she jerked back.

Alec was leaning on the table, watching her with obvious approval.

"It's a pleasure to watch a female enjoy her food as you are. I hate to take a young lady out and have her pick at what she's ordered."

"Hah!" chortled Vivie. "You've been going out with debutantes."

"Ridiculous." Alec positively sputtered. "Why do you say a thing like that?"

"Because a favorite trick of debutantes is to eat very well before going out so they can pretend to be light eaters. Dainty appetites supposedly impress the suitors."

She realized her mistake as Alec stared at her.

"And why would you know such a thing, Miss Field?"

"Do call me Vivie," she stammered. "Oh, just something I heard someplace."

He stared at her for a long moment before finally looking down and attacking his lasagna.

She drank from her wineglass and then took a smaller swallow. She'd better watch how fast she drank. Too easy to forget how alcohol could loosen the tongue when it tasted so good.

So they both were covering up things they didn't want the other to know. How interesting, if not the tiniest bit alarming. He was quite intelligent and Vivie feared she might have alerted him more than she wanted. Could she also be alarming him?

She raised her wineglass. "We both seem inclined to be mysterious. I hope your reason for reticence is as good as mine."

She enjoyed watching the emotions flitting across his heretofore inscrutable face. As she knew him better, she found him easier to read. First she saw a hint of unease and then appreciation for her lighthearted understanding and candor.

He lifted his own wineglass in a toast to her. A devastating grin spread from those well-shaped lips to his eyes. Again the startling change. He was now that different person, a warm, caring person she might like a good deal.

“Touché, Vivie. Shall we cry quits until one of us decides to surrender our secrets?”

A slow smile spread over her face. “We can always talk about medicine.”

He gave a mock shudder and smote his forehead. “Oh, no. Anything but that!”

She laughed and began talking about her plans for the future.

“Although this is indirectly about medicine. I’m looking for a spot to open my own clinic. I hope to combine traditional and herbal medicine and to make it very plain my clinic is different than most. It’ll be different both in treatment and in charges.”

His dark eyebrows arched higher.

“And will the authorities permit that?”

“It might seem unconventional to you, but it’s not illegal to dispense herbal medicine.”

She couldn’t quite keep the snap out of her voice.

He sipped his wine thoughtfully, the creases back in his forehead.

“No, I suppose not,” he said slowly. “But you are truly a superior nurse. I would recommend you to any hospital if for some reason you don’t want to stay at London. I hate to see you try such a risky venture. And won’t you need a doctor to handle the setting up of such a clinic, one to prescribe traditional drugs?”

Vivie tried to throttle her chagrin. She purely hated the fact he was right, she’d need a doctor to help her get those traditional drugs she felt worthwhile.

She laughed and changed the subject.

“I do apologize. I talked about medicine after all. Tell me about your own plans. I know you’re recognized as an outstanding doctor, but do you want to spend the rest of your life at London Hospital? Although I’ll admit you’re well on your way up the ladder to an even more responsible position.”

To her surprise he didn’t fall instantly into her trap of talking about himself. Instead he quirked one of his impressively thick eyebrows.

“That’s a statement I didn’t expect from you, Vivie. How would you know my status on the ladder of success? Do you nurses gossip about such matters? And I must say I’m surprised to find you listening to such chatter.”

Vivie decided her dessert needed more of her attention. Blessed Merlin, why did she keep making these slips? He was much too quick to miss any blunder she made. She could hardly tell him her Duchess grandmother personally followed his career.

She slowly licked the last of the zabaglione from her spoon.

“Oh, it’s not just gossip. Everyone at the hospital respects your ability, Alec.”

He looked at her closely before he smiled that beautiful smile.

"You puzzle me, you know. Your own clinic sounds quite ambitious. Still I don't want to be so curious as to be obnoxious. If you find a doctor to help you, where would you like your clinic to be?"

Since she'd given this a good deal of consideration, she could answer quickly.

"Not in the best part of town and not in the worst. I don't want a charity clinic. I feel there's a great need for medical help that's not outright charity, but still not overly expensive. I envision a clinic where patients pay a small amount. Enough to furnish a decent salary, but not a huge one to the doctor in charge. My clinic won't have any frills, but it will have superior care."

Stratton put down his coffee cup and stared at her.

"You surprise me once again. I feared you'd choose to give away your talents. Your rather startling empathy shows plainly, you know."

Vivie felt herself flushing. "I don't think you understand what I'm saying. I feel you can help the poor the most by not destroying their pride. Charity often does that."

Stratton smiled the smile that made her heart jolt.

"I'm beginning to understand you better. You're not only amazingly beautiful, Vivie, your mind is entrancing. I can't agree with half you say, but I'm entranced."

That did make her blush. So he did think her pretty.

Alec watched in fascination as a creamy pink suffused every inch that he could see. He wished he could see more. The neckline of her dress dipped enough that the top swell of her firm breasts were visible, just enough to make any virile male wonder how they'd feel in his hands.

Time to shut off that line of thought. Vivie Field was a girl who could seduce the Angel Gabriel. Not only her beauty, but her quick mind and high standards were a delight. Standards too idealistic for him to even think to match.

He leaned back in his chair and decided it was time to shatter the mood growing steamier by the minute. At least on his side. He felt hot enough to combust spontaneously. Going up in smoke was reported to be a rare feat, but right now it seemed easy. All he'd have to do would be lean over and kiss those provocative lips.

He took a large swallow of wine and carefully laid down his glass. Speaking with deliberation, he slowed the pace to a level he could handle.

"You have an interesting goal, Vivie. Mine is quite different. I intend to marry a girl well placed in society, preferably one with lots of money and build the most elite, private and expensive practice in all of London."

He leaned back in his chair and fixed his eyes on hers.

He hated himself even as he spoke. However, he wanted her to know exactly where he stood. She was quite capable of worming her way into his heart, a place she never could stay. Where he didn't want her in the slightest.

Her face looked first startled and then he watched it cloud with disappointment. She looked down at the table for a moment before she spoke again.

“How strange you felt it necessary to tell me such a goal when you knew I’d disapprove. Or did you mean this as a warning, Dr. Stratton? I assure you I don’t need it.”

She was far too clever. He could literally see her withdrawing as she shrank back in her own chair and fixed those gorgeous green eyes on him. A little disdain and some sadness in her emerald glance.

This wasn’t what he wanted either. In fact, what did he want? He knew the answer, of course. What he wanted was to grab Vivie Field and kiss her until those delectable curves melted against him as she returned his kisses. She’d be supple and willing and he’d kiss her until her bright mind closed to anything but him. He shook his head slightly. These erotic thoughts were exactly why he’d forced himself to speak.

He deliberately chose to break the fragile bond that stretched almost visibly between them. He would tell her at least some of the truth.

“No, I was warning myself. Never you. The danger is all on my side. You’re far too attractive for a man with an objective like mine. I can’t afford to be anything but your friend. But I’d love to be just that if you’d let me. I enjoy your company very much. And my name is Alec.”

Vivie fixed her eyes on him with what he now thought of as her “Druid look”. Certainly her clear stare could make anyone squirm while she found what her mind was seeking.

His relief when she slowly smiled was unreasonable. She was only another pretty girl and one he definitely didn’t want to pursue with anything in mind but friendship. That he found her quite hopelessly adorable could have no connection with his long range goals.

He put his doubts aside as she surprised him by placing her hand over his as it lay on the table. A thrill shot up his arm and down to every small bone in his spine. He kept his eyes lowered. He didn’t want to even know if she’d felt that mesmerizing shock as strongly as he did. He thought she might have, as her voice sounded a trifle breathless.

He encompassed her palm in his.

“I’d like you to be my friend,” she finally ventured.

“Thank you,” he said simply. “I’m pleased.”

No way would he tell her he’d have babbled like an idiot and offered to give up all his long-held strategy if she so wished. Although he would have regretted it later. Still, he wasn’t as strong-willed as he’d always thought. He’d have to be much more careful.

“Shall we now talk about perfectly inconsequential things while I finish my coffee?”

Vivie’s smile seemed perfectly genuine, although a light shadow lingered in those extraordinary eyes.

Alec agreed, even though this was not his warmest wish. He'd like to discuss the way his heart turned over when she smiled directly into his eyes. How it was an effort to keep from reaching across the table and clutching her to him.

Chatter was the best solution.

Although he should have known she'd not finished attacking his mind as well as all his too susceptible senses.

"After all, there are so many fascinating subjects we haven't even touched. Have you seen the newest Charlie Chaplin film? A countryman of yours you can be proud of. And what about the new artists? Have you seen the works of Paul Klee? Doubtless you know Renoir, but I think Klee is even more interesting. Or don't you like modern art?"

He took a deep breath. Miss Vivie Field was not the girl to let one relax and drift. Nor one to indulge in gossipy chatter.

"I esteem Chaplin, but I'm not that familiar with Klee. Should I be?"

Her eyes lit with stars of attention and he sharpened his brain and sat back to enjoy, and probably learn from, her response.

What a shame she wasn't wealthy and titled.

She was everything a man could want. Completely adorable. What a shame.

Chapter Seven

Vivie debated how to best approach Dr. Lovernios when he wrote her asking her to the latest play at the Prince Theatre. It seemed a perfect solution. She could have an enjoyable evening and sound him out on joining her in her new kind of clinic. She phoned him at the hospital with the message she'd be delighted.

Stephen had tickets for *Monsieur Beaucaire*, a lighthearted musical with spectacular dueling scenes. Lots of melodies, most of them forgettable and a good deal of comedy verging on slapstick. When Dr. Lovernios suggested a bite to eat afterward it didn't surprise her he chose a vegetarian restaurant. Not a fancy restaurant but the food proved to be excellent. What had surprised her was his choosing such a froth of a play. But then all of London seemed to want triviality these days, doubtless a reaction to the long, horrible war years. There were few serious plays now on the boards.

During the intermission they'd agreed to use first names and Stephen seemed somehow to fit him. He was a truly beautiful man. Tall, strongly-built, with a shock of red-blond hair and light blue eyes. Quite different from Alec's stern darkness. Stephen's disposition also proved dissimilar. He was gay and almost playful. In fact the two men could hardly be more of a contrast, although they were both excellent doctors.

She waited until they were almost finished with their vegetable burgers to tell him about her idea of opening a clinic melding Druid and traditional medicine.

He put down his fork immediately.

"A wonderful idea! But how will you obtain funding to get you started? It will all take a lot of money, you know. I'd love to participate if you can actually swing it."

Vivie didn't answer immediately. He was probably wise to hesitate to commit on a nebulous idea, but somehow she felt disappointed. She imagined he doubted she'd ever get funding. One quick glimpse into his mind told her he thought her a charming daydreamer.

But she needed him. No accredited doctor would throw over all his prospects unless she offered something in return. She couldn't expect him to share her plans without a single question, even though he shared some part of her dream.

She took a sip of her herbal tea. "I already have the funding, Dr. Lovernios."

"Stephen," he corrected, with an endearing smile. "Wonderful. Then I'm your man, Nurse Vivie Field. I'm getting bored with the hospital routine and would welcome something new. Particularly if it helps someone who might not otherwise get good medical care."

They left it at that. Vivie wanted to pick out the location herself, so she smiled her most satisfied smile and merely said she'd get back to him as soon as she ironed out the details.

The conversation turned to Stephen's war years, which he'd spent in the remote Scottish Highlands.

"As an objector to all wars, I felt it prudent to absent myself from the ridiculously patriotic scene."

Vivie thought she showed no reaction, but Stephen laughed. "I'm not only a Druid, but a Druid bard. Wandering is a way of life with me. Did you forget about rootless bards, Vivie? I'm not your ordinary doctor with aspirations of wealth. Nor your ordinary patriot. You know a doctor has open access to any society he wants. I enjoy being a doctor, as well as a bard. I can meet almost anyone I really want to meet. I can go to any country to meet them. People can be quite fascinating, don't you think?"

"Of course, but if you feel so strongly against war, tell me what you think about the new League of Nations. Do you think it has a chance of bringing peace to the world as Mr. Wilson claims?"

Stephen grimaced. "I can only hope so. It's ambitious, certainly. I fear for the world if this doesn't work."

Vivie looked at his suddenly serious face. Evidently there was more to Stephen than she'd suspected.

"I've turned the conversation away from my main purpose. I'll be so glad if you come with me at the clinic. Just don't pack up and take off on a bardic journey without warning me."

Although she laughed she meant every word. He could leave her in a tricky spot if he dashed off without warning. Bards were not noted for staying over-long in one place.

He quirked an eyebrow at her but then smiled. "I forgot to tell you I love to sing, too. I could serenade our patients. Now would you like some soybean ice cream? Or would you rather have fruit?"

She opted for fruit and sat back with a smile on her face. Stephen would bear watching so she'd know if he began to feel restless. Still he'd help get the clinic on its way. In fact, a lot of the clients would doubtless fall in love with his charismatic splendor.

He'd do quite well to get her started.

They both wanted something from the other. A solid basis for a relationship. Maybe not the warmest kind, but still a relationship.

She licked her spoon. The fruit tasted fresh and really very good. Still –

"I wish I'd ordered two desserts. Your ice cream looks so good. May I have a bite?"

With a laugh he pushed his dish toward her.

“Guests can have anything they want from their hosts. No, no, I’ll get another dessert if I choose. I have a feeling the fruit was better, anyway.”

He laughed again as she nodded her agreement and kept right on licking up the ice cream.

Busy with her two desserts, she didn’t notice how his eyes fastened on her mouth and lingered there.

Chapter Eight

The days went racing by as Vivie concentrated on searching for the perfect spot for her clinic. She finally found exactly what she wanted. An empty warehouse on the outskirts of the Cheapside district. Respectable, but not too expensive. She knew the moment she saw it she wanted it. There would be plenty of room to expand.

She saw the agent's eyes light up and tamped down her enthusiasm. She didn't even have to sneak a peek into his mind to realize his greed and decision to cheat her. She turned and started to walk away.

"But, madam," he said. "Isn't this just what you wanted?"

"At first I thought so," she said coolly. "Now I'm not nearly so sure. It's more space than I need and I'm sure will cost me more than I want."

She started to leave again and almost laughed at the distress he tried to conceal.

"Maybe we can make a deal where you only pay for the amount of space you need." The agent grabbed her sleeve, but she brushed his hand off. "Besides inflation after the war is driving prices up. You'd best buy before they go higher."

"Oh, really? But I'm not prepared to pay as much as you're doubtless thinking. Oh well, I'll just keep looking."

The agent nearly broke into tears and she finally turned back to listen to a good offer, which she also rejected. She said very little and when the offer became more than attractive she let herself be persuaded. Mean of her really, but maybe not with such a shoddy excuse of a man. She signed the purchase offer, aware she might have done a little better, but still she'd gotten a bargain.

She set about transforming the space. A monumental task, as the debris and dirt from former tenants mounded not only behind the building, but in several of the rooms. One night she settled down to engage in her own method of cleaning and didn't hear Alec come in.

He found her with her heels tucked on the rung of a decrepit chair, talking to someone he couldn't see.

"I know you have a family and are taking good care of them, but I'm asking you to find other quarters. I'll be bringing little children in here and nervous women who might not understand what a good creature you are at heart. Will you do this for me, without taking offense? Otherwise I'm afraid members of my staff will set wicked traps for you and neither one of us wants that."

Who on earth was she speaking such nonsense to? He could see no one, so he came further into the room.

"Vivie," he said simply.

She jumped off the chair, then stood, shaking out her skirts and running her fingers through her bright curls.

"I love your voice," she said, shattering his defenses with her words and her smile. "It's so deep and beckoning. Hello, Alec. I wasn't expecting you so you gave me a start."

He came into the room. He hadn't realized quite how starved he'd been for the splendid sight of her. He walked over and perched on the box next to her.

He picked up her hand and played idly with her fingers.

"Who were you talking to just now? I can't see anybody else in the room."

She laughed, but took her hand back. He was glad she did as it was proving far too pleasant to hold. Much more than pleasant, in fact. Jolting. Bone and fiber jolting.

She sounded a little breathless as she answered.

"I guess you didn't see him, then. He was over in the corner. Mr. Rat, the father of a large family of rats and one who will now be moving from my premises. I hope I haven't made it hard for him, but they really couldn't stay here in safety."

He stared at the corner and then back at her.

"You're serious, aren't you?"

"Of course I am. I do hope I didn't hurt his feelings, though. I can tell he's basically shy."

He shook his head as if to clear it. "If I didn't know how bright you are I'd worry about these fancies of yours."

She smiled slightly but her tone was somber.

"Someday perhaps you'll see they aren't fancies, Alec. Right now your mind is closed. But what on earth are you doing here in the middle of the day?"

Her voice lifted to plainly show her delight and he answered with a grin. He didn't want to even comment on anything else she'd said.

"Even too-busy doctors need some time off. I've ordered a lunch to take to the Park, if you'll consent to come with me. We can stop to pick it up and go straight there. Do say you'll come!"

"I've already displayed my pleasure, so can hardly tell you I'm not interested."

She tossed her head, her hair flipping back, her smile underscoring the enthusiasm in her gesture.

"Let's go. All this can definitely wait."

Without another word she turned to go. He tried to control his grin. She was so very special. He didn't know another girl who wouldn't have demanded time to fix her face or her hair. He led her out to the waiting cab and to his own surprise dropped a kiss on her gleaming curls as he handed her in.

"Your hair is so beautiful with the sun shining on it. I'm glad you don't know my thoughts. I'd like to be even more of a rogue than you might already think me."

His voice sounded husky and filled with longing, even to himself. He shuttered his face and busied himself with looking for the café he'd asked to fix their picnic lunch. He didn't glance at her again until he got back in the cab with a hamper and directed their driver to go to the lake in Green Park.

He saw Vivie staring at him in seeming wonder. Was he as much a puzzle to her as she was to him? Having a conversation with a rat, for God's sakes. What would she dream up next?

He listened for a while as she began to chatter about her plans. At his questioning, she admitted she'd hired cleaning crews and she'd never intended to do the really heavy work herself. His slightly raised eyebrows alerted her to his curiosity of where her money came from, but he was too polite to question her.

Vivie suddenly was sorry she and Kate had agreed to limit their mind probing to occasions when there seemed to be real danger. Too bad to cut off so much fun at times, but still this way did seem more courteous. She'd dearly love to know why Alec pursued her at all when he was convinced she didn't figure in his long-term interests. If the thought passed through her mind of how angry he'd be if he knew she were rich and titled, she shoved it hurriedly aside. She meant to enjoy this unexpected treat of time with him.

They'd finished their sandwiches and were lounging on the blanket Alec provided when she sat up with a start and a persuasive smile. She'd grabbed up a pad of paper and a pencil on her way out of the warehouse and now she handed it to him.

"I've started to draw plans for remodeling, but I'm hopeless with sketches. I've set aside a space for a room to hold ten beds. We might not need so many and more would be too hard to take care of just yet. That's as far as I've gotten."

He picked up the pad. "At least you've got the sizes down. My, you've rented a lot of space, Vivie."

"It's very cheap," she said quickly. She didn't think it necessary to add she'd bought the warehouse. "And I can hear your mind wondering about the money. I have a certain sum from my grandmother. She has always been more than generous with me."

They were both silent while he scrutinized her measurements. She could feel the questions winging through his mind.

"I know I'm risking quite a lot at once, Alec. But didn't our Prime Minister just make some statement about how you can't cross a chasm with two steps? To do this right I must do my best in one big jump."

He began sketching as he answered. "Hmmm. I never heard that, although Lloyd George makes some very quotable remarks. I would never question you about your funding, Vivie, although I'm glad you've thought it through. Let's see, you'll need a room for a dispensary, of course and be sure to install locks on both the door and the closets."

At her quick glance he knew she was thinking of Dr. Wheeler, just as he wanted her to.

“And a small room with at least one couch for staff to rest on if they need it. Oh yes and a large waiting room for patients, with good lighting and comfortable chairs.”

She broke in excitedly. “And big tables to hold magazines for the grownups and little tables for the youngsters with paper and crayons.”

His Druid would always think of making others happy. “Have you been interviewing doctors?”

He sketched in two bathrooms, one private for the staff and one for the public and then began adding little squares and rectangles in the other rooms and giving furniture tags to them.

“Oh, I didn’t have to. Dr. Lovernios is joining me.”

He didn’t respond at first. Lovernios, the handsome and rather devil-may-care doctor who had half the nurses at London Hospital sighing over him.

“He’s a good doctor,” he finally forced himself to say. All very true. Stephen Lovernios was good. Too good-looking to be real but also a fine doctor.

He picked up his sketch again.

“Let’s see if we’ve forgotten anything. Do you want a separate small room for patient’s outer garments, or will a couple of coat racks do?”

His pencil moved busily over the paper. Her answer was important to him. Already the improvements she wanted would cost a small fortune. Could her grandmother be wealthy, or was she contributing her last cent to furthering her granddaughter’s dream? Not really his business, but he’d love to know. Although a lot of the upper-middle class stashed away some money.

“Sketch in the room, please, but we’ll probably do with coat racks for a while. Alec, you’re so good at this. I would have spent a week dithering. May I look now?”

“I’ve spent time thinking about my own eventual practice.” He erased a line and put in another, then handed her the sketch. “I think I’ve got the basics. You can make other improvements as you go along, as you find out more what you need.”

She took the paper, then leaned over to kiss his cheek in gratitude. Just as she did he turned to get her reaction to his work and their lips met. Squarely. Hotly. Building almost instantly from a simple kiss of pleased friendship to a steaming sexuality. He grabbed her head and slanting her lips to his kissed her until they both were forced to draw breath. He held onto her as if she were his only hope of life.

“Wow,” Vivie drew her head back a little. Her emerald eyes were huge and hungry for more. Something Alec suspected she didn’t even realize she betrayed. She placed her fingers on her lips and stared into his eyes.

Damnation. He’d never meant to kiss her. Not and go up in flames. Not with so much passion he could hardly draw his breath, let alone speak. It was too wonderful to regret, but he’d be very careful not to slip his control again. Vivie Fields kissed like an

angel sent to Earth to test man's willpower. If he kissed her again he didn't think he'd be strong enough to ever stop.

Her body heat called to him, luring him to one more embrace. Her personal scent was unique and floral, arousing him to stay when he knew well he should flee. He suspected she'd distilled some fragrance of her own. She was precious and rare. Too wonderful for him.

He busied himself rolling up the blanket and collecting the trash.

Vivie kept her eyes fixed on him, a question in them he glimpsed but preferred not to contemplate. He said nothing. Nothing at all.

"It's time to go," Vivie finally said, as she turned away and walked ahead to lead them off the grass and to the waiting cab.

Damn it, she walked with the most graceful strides he'd ever seen. A kind of half glide, half-walk. Just like an angel would move if one were forced to walk on Earth.

Damn and double damn. Bloody hell.

The afternoon had been a disaster, at least for him.

He wished he knew what it had meant to her.

Chapter Nine

Vivie immersed her waking mind in the fascinating particulars of readying her clinic. She switched off any thoughts of Alec. As soon as one tried to poke its way in she slammed her mind shut. She occupied not only her brain, but her whole body and strength. She'd watched the partitioning go up very much along the lines Alec sketched their shattering day in the Park. Not a day she wanted to think about except for the excellent plan he'd laid out and which she followed. Other than that she shut him out. Most of the time.

At night she tossed in her sleep and dreamed about Alec's kiss, waking up with his name on her lips. She could even evoke his particular scent. Lemony and spicy. In her dreams she locked her hands in his hair and pulled his head down to hers, once again experiencing the heaven of his kiss.

She didn't stay in bed in the morning, jumping up and shoving away such futile thoughts. Her wayward imaginings infuriated her. She had so many important things to do. She shouldn't be wasting a minute in fruitless daydreams. His splendid grey eyes, glowing into hers, were simply an unimportant distraction.

She helped paint the partitions a bright yellow. She supervised the laying of white tiles on the cement floors. She ordered ten more windows installed and then hung yellow and white striped curtains to add to the cheerfulness she determined to foster.

She hired inexperienced help to do the cleaning. Armies of unemployed walked the streets looking for work and she didn't have the heart to hire an experienced crew. She felt they did a good job, although she knew more must be done to make the clinic as sanitary as she wished it to be. But when they finished she did one more scrubbing of the floors to satisfy herself everything was as clean as one could make it.

She went to the alley most nights before she left to put out some cheese for Mr. Rat and his family and mouthed goodnight and a little thanks to them all.

Stephen dropped by several times in the weeks of her preparation, giving her good-natured advice and assuring her he'd come when she was ready to open. He never stayed long. Nor did he offer to help. Vivie decided it was just as well, since she'd surprised herself by her perfectionist standards. She wanted to do it all herself.

People stopped by nearly every day and she always took time to answer their questions. Quite a few expressed pleasure at her payment schedule. Many of them said they could afford a doctor if she charged such moderate fees. A lot of them tried to test her with a few questions on private medical problems, but she told them she couldn't give them quick answers.

As she said again and again in those weeks, "You've probably been bothered by this condition for some time. I would be doing you an injustice if I answered it too quickly, without knowing more about it."

One or two were offended their bid for free medical advice didn't work, but most grinned and said they'd be back when she opened. She waved cheerfully as they went off smiling.

The night before the scheduled opening, Vivie sat on the floor in the middle of the ward. She looked around with sheer delight. Everything gleamed in perfection.

The clinic was ready. She couldn't remember when she'd felt more pleased. If Kate clamored in her head to go talk to Alec and tell him of her opening, she ignored her. Kate knew how hurt she felt that he'd left her strictly alone all these last weeks, but her twin still urged her to make a move to see him. No way, Kate, she thought as she gave one last look around. This time you're wrong.

It was very late and she knew she should be leaving. Catching a cab in this part of town was always chancy but she'd have to try.

As she put one hand on the floor and vaulted to her feet, she looked up to see Alec standing in the doorway. Not smiling. Not even appearing to be glad to see her. Her heart twisted in her body and then settled to an irregular beat. She tried not to look too pleased, pasting a half-frown on her face.

His voice was low and solemn.

"I knew you'd still be here and would not take time to think of any danger to yourself. It's not safe to be here alone this late. Let's go."

His expression didn't change from an almost glare.

She automatically stiffened. "Don't you at least want to look around? It's quite nice, you know."

A very slight smile curved his chiseled lips. "I'm sure it is, Vivie. Your taste has always been impeccable. Let's go. Tomorrow is a big day for you and you need what sleep you can get."

So he'd been keeping track of her. Through Stephen?

Her head filled with wonder as she moved toward him.

"You baffle me, Alec. I thought you'd decided not to see me at all."

A wry smile twisted his lips. "I'd prefer to do so, Miss Vivie Field. It's my misfortune my will is so weak."

"Because I'm not rich enough for you?"

She clapped her hands over her mouth as she heard herself voice her bitter thought.

He shook his handsome head as if he were in pain. "Not just that. Although money is important to me. I also need a wife who will devote herself to furthering my ascent in society. Not one who is dedicated to helping the world's unfortunates."

His words struck her with as much force as an agonizing blow to her stomach. She nearly doubled over as she realized fully how far apart they were in their goals. She saw clearly for the first time she'd cherished a secret hope someday when he'd discovered her birth the knowledge would make him turn to her. He'd doubtless be angry when he first found out and she'd make him squirm for a while and then everything would be clear sailing into a rosy future.

He'd find out, of course. It was inevitable. But she was dreaming a hopeless dream.

She now knew all his goals were superficial. How could she even secretly want him?

Where on earth were her pride and her ability to think clearly? Lost in dreamy memories of that unfortunate kiss. One thing she knew for sure. She would never, ever, reveal her yearnings to him.

From somewhere she gathered strength to stiffen her spine and smile at him. How she did it she couldn't guess. She never even let the tears start, so she didn't have to blink them back.

"It's very nice of you to come see me home, Alec. Shall we go now?"

He gave her a piercing look and then completely surprised her by bending over and kissing her forehead. A sweet kiss, not filled with passion like his last. Perhaps even tinged with regret.

"Good luck, my dear. Let's go, indeed. I intend to see you very safely home."

He smiled at her, took her hand and walked her out. They spoke very little on the long ride to Emily's. They were both careful to sit near their own corner of the cab's seat.

Vivie felt as if someone just hit her over the head with a large flat board. She'd not the strength or the desire to utter a word. She'd done the unforgivable. She'd fallen in love with a man not worthy of her. One who never even attempted to appreciate her Druid capabilities. One who never would.

And yet it seemed to make little difference to the craving in her stupid, stupid heart.

She was left with only one consolation. He would never, ever, know of her love for him. Her pride would protect her from that pitiful disclosure, at least.

She kept her composure until he'd seen her to Emily's door and left. She leaned her head against the wall of the vestibule and stayed without moving for a few moments. She needed strength to face Emily before she could excuse herself and crawl into bed.

Pride was a lonely bedfellow, indeed, but right now it was all she had.

Chapter Ten

The clinic proved an instant success. Workers who'd helped ready it, people who'd stopped by to see what was going on, everyone reported the new nurse more than usually caring as well as knowledgeable and easy on the eyes. Vivie made it plain if you could pay the clinic would be grateful. If you couldn't you would still be helped.

She found herself delighted in those first few weeks at the number who paid what they could and pledged to bring the rest in later. Most of them did just that.

Stephen, of course, was a huge success. He flirted outrageously with all females. Matrons and girls in their teens, most of them swearing to do just what their handsome doctor suggested. He flirted even more outrageously with Vivie. She rather enjoyed it, took none of it seriously. It was just Stephen's fun-loving disposition.

She was stunned one day when he walked in her office and took care to shut the door behind him.

"Stephen? Is there something important you wanted to tell me?"

She put down the pencil she was using to try to balance the accounts. Lordy, how she wished she Kate were closer. Of course she always wished for Kate's presence, but right now she needed Kate's impressive ability with figures.

He perched himself on the edge of her desk and leaned over and kissed her cheek.

"Stephen. Thank you. But what's this all about? This isn't like you."

His blue eyes were more serious than usual.

"Sometimes I think you don't know what is like me and what is not, my Celtic Queen."

Some undertone in his voice alarmed her out of all proportion. This was Stephen, after all, her lighthearted friend who laughed or sang his way through all of life's intensities. Time after time she'd heard him croon a lullaby to a frightened child. Or tell a little girl one of his bardic tales to keep her spellbound through a painful procedure.

"You're as elusive as your Druid namesake, Vivie. This time I want to talk seriously."

Half-frightened, she sat back in her chair. "Of course, Stephen. Just don't tell me you're leaving me. Not so soon."

His face was indeed more severe than she'd ever seen.

"Stephen! You're frightening me!"

He came around the desk and knelt beside her. "I don't mean to do so, love. I just want you to know I'm serious about you, when I never thought I would say those words to any woman. But you are so very special. I'd like you to know one thing. For

you I would settle down and try to be the man you want, no matter what it entails. I love you, Vivie. Is there a chance for me?"

She'd never before felt so completely at sea as to what to do or say. Completely stupid. She stroked his hair, pushing back one red-gold strand falling over his forehead.

"Stephen. I'm amazed and terribly flattered. I truly had no idea, no idea at all. And I thought myself fairly perceptive."

He laid his head very briefly in her lap. When he pushed himself upright, his gaze was more bitter than she'd thought possible from this happy man.

"That's because I'm such a clown. I act the clown partly to make life easier for others and partly for myself. I've been afraid up to now someone might take me seriously when I didn't want them to. With you it's just the opposite."

She still couldn't think what to say and he started to turn away.

"Your silence speaks for you, love."

His lighthearted tone was back, but a quick glimpse showed her his eyes were bleak as a winter's gale.

"No, wait, Stephen." She tugged at the hem of his white coat. "You've taken me by surprise, it's not fair to judge my silence so harshly. Do give me time to think."

He stood facing away from her. "If you loved me you wouldn't need time to think, my dear. Tell me one thing, is there anyone else in your heart?"

If he only had not added the last three words. She might have honestly said there was no one else now, but in her heart? She couldn't deny her heart. Again silence answered for her.

"I can't say I'm surprised. Damn Stratton to hell. The devil's luckier than he knows. Or does he know? No, your stricken expression tells me differently. Double-damn the bastard as an insensitive lout."

His bitter voice told her how much he truly cared and her eyes filled with the tears she'd fought shedding for Alec.

"Stephen, give me some time here. I don't know what the future holds for us, if anything, but I like and respect you. Very much. Enormously! Let's see if my admiration can grow into something even better. I can assure you no one else has a claim on me."

He was too intelligent to be overly hopeful, but still his face flared with optimism. Watching him, Vivie smiled to herself. What a wonderful disposition, which didn't allow him to be other than hopeful.

His own smile would delight any ordinary female.

"As you say, my dearest Druid. Now let's go take care of our waiting room of impatient patients."

She giggled as she rose to follow him out the door. Why could not her stupid heart appreciate this special man? Perhaps in time it would. She was more than ever grateful for his gaiety. Fully as important a gift as her magic.

* * * * *

Vivie tried even harder now, but couldn't quite put Alec out of her mind. She and Stephen were just closing up one night when Alec appeared. At first she thought she'd conjured him, but his sure stride as he came toward her proclaimed him real.

She hoped her joy wasn't too evident. The last two weeks had been long and dragging, in spite of her absorption in the clinic.

He strode to her and took her hands, holding them so tightly she almost winced.

"Vivie, you look as lovely as usual, although a little too tired. I'm here for an important reason. They released Wheeler yesterday from the hospital where I'd sent him for treatment for his addiction. The chief-of-staff phoned me today. He said Wheeler insisted he had the right to leave. They'd no choice. The chief added he's not convinced the man's cured."

"Oh, the poor soul," Vivie sighed. "How terrible for him if he's not over his cravings."

An impatient look passed over his face. "Vivie, of course it's terrible. But I'm more worried about you. Which is why I came here instead of phoning. From what the chief-of-staff told me Wheeler is obsessed with your part of my sending him there. If I had to do over I would let him go to jail. Maybe forcible withdrawal would have worked better."

For the first time Vivie knew what had happened to Wheeler, although Alec once told her he was in good hands and she'd let it drop. Beaming at Alec, she didn't even try to resist showing her pleasure at the sight of him. His hair was ruffled, he wore black pants and a black shirt and soft-soled shoes. He'd evidently come from his apartment, not the hospital. To her, he looked wonderful. She'd never seen him dressed so casually and he loomed more handsome than ever in her admiring eyes.

He drew a quick breath and held it for a heartbeat.

"Vivie, don't look at me so. I can hardly keep my hands off you as it is."

His voice seemed to scrape in his throat, low and strained and she wasn't about to stop her admiration just to make it easy for him. In fact, she'd make it harder if she could.

"What will you do if I don't stop?" she asked, her mischievous face tilted to his. She didn't need her Druid powers right now. She could see the battle he was having with himself. He wanted above all else to take her in his arms. She didn't have to invade his mind since it opened wide to her.

Although she might reach in if he closed himself off to her.

"Vivie," he groaned, coming close with hands outstretched to pull her out of her chair.

Just then Stephen dashed in. "Vivie, I've—" He broke off. "Oh, you're here Stratton. Vivie, I was locking up the dispensary when I smelled smoke. You get out of here while I investigate."

Vivie swallowed her disappointment and turned to Stephen.

"I'd rather help," she said. "Did the smell come from inside or out?"

"Outside, I think, but it's quite strong. On second thought, maybe you'd better stay here 'til we find out more."

"Oh dear Goddess!" Vivie spoke softly as she looked in the direction of the dispensary. "I can smell it now."

"I think maybe we have two fires," said Alec. "I can smell another one outside and quite close."

They all three now saw small flames coming from under the door of the examination room. Stephen grabbed some towels and rushed to flail at them, then wrapped a towel around the door handle. The minute he opened the door they could see the fire directly inside, a nasty one of piled papers and a few sticks of wood. Flames were licking and climbing into the close-by shelves.

"I'll take care of this one, Stratton, you check outside for the other."

Alec saw Stephen could handle the present blaze and ran to do as suggested, with Vivie close at his heels. Immediately outside the window nearest the back door was the second and larger fire, a smoky pile of burning rags doubtless soaked in some kind of oil. Even as they watched the rags flared up into a hot blaze. Alec looked wildly around and finding nothing to help him, dashed back inside to get some blankets, then ran back to beat at the flames. The fire was bigger and more treacherous than he'd thought. At first he made little headway, even though Vivie rushed out with more blankets to help.

They battled the fire together for a long-stretching period. By the time they controlled the blaze Vivie was grubby and exhausted and yet relieved. If not caught, this one had been capable of burning down the clinic.

"There," Alec finally said. "It's under control. But what a mess. There's no doubt about one thing. This is definitely arson."

Vivie plopped down on the ground. It reminded her so much of her first encounter with the dreaded Dr. Stratton that she flashed her most mischievous smile.

"Do you have anything to reproach me for this time, Dr. Stratton? Should I report to you for disciplinary measures tomorrow? After all, I'm resting on the job."

He looked puzzled for just a second and then caught on.

"No, my dear, although I regret your propensity to get into scrapes."

He came to her and offered her his hands to help her up.

"You have soot on your face," he said in a strangled tone. He took his handkerchief from his pocket, giving a low laugh when he saw how his own hands dirtied the cloth where he touched it. He carefully folded it to find a clean patch and leaning over, scrubbed at her cheek and forehead.

"Oh, Vivie," he moaned, just before he kissed her upraised lips. Wildly. With all the passion she could desire. He grabbed her in his arms and held her flush against his body. Surprised at his muscled strength and thrilled by the feel of his hard contours

against her, she shivered with delight. She'd no idea being held so passionately would trigger such alluring thrills. He ran his hands over her body, crushing her even tighter against his erection as he deepened the kiss. The heat of his abandoned embrace rushed through her like a third fire through straw.

They heard the back door opening and sprang apart, although Vivie felt sure she was red with guilt. Stephen gave her a quick look and then averted his eyes.

"The blaze inside is extinguished," he said curtly.

Then they heard the sound of breaking glass and everything else was forgotten as they all rushed back in the clinic. The men in the lead, but Vivie close behind. They found a distraught Wheeler rifling through the bottles of the dispensary cabinet, throwing some aside as he continued ransacking the shelves. Bottles and packets littered the floor. He didn't even see them for a moment.

They all briefly watched him, Vivie with pity in her eyes, Stephen and Alec with fury in theirs.

Finally Alec spoke. "Enough, Wheeler. This time I won't go easy on you. You belong in jail."

The man wheeled around, a pitiful, shaking, figure.

"Stratton! You're not supposed to be here. I didn't want you to be hurt."

Alec clenched his fists. "I suppose you mean you don't care if others are? Have you no decency left?"

"You don't know what it's like! You don't know at all! How can you judge me from your safe perch at the top of the hospital ladder? Have some pity, Stratton. Give me just one dose of morphine and I'll go quietly wherever you want to take me."

His disgust was plain in Alec's voice. "No. I'll not be a party to your addiction. And I'll never forgive you for endangering Miss Field."

Wheeler seemed to see her for the first time.

"Why should you have all the luck, you damn bitch?"

He lurched toward her, but two strong men caught him and wrestled him to the floor.

"Get some rope or strong bandages, Vivie. We'll deliver him to the police this time. The charges will be arson and attempted murder. Call the local station, Lovernios. We'd better all stay here to give evidence."

Wheeler started screaming vile names at them all, until Stephen hit him once on his jaw and silenced him.

"Good," said Alec, his voice showing his weariness and distress. "He's better off unconscious for a while."

He turned to Vivie and took her face in his hands.

"I'm so sorry, my dear. I came tonight to warn you. I never dreamed he'd act so quickly."

Vivie swallowed the lump in her throat. He cared for her. He cared a great deal. She'd peeked inside his mind just for a moment and found almost all the emotion she could want. It was covered with a layer of self-protection, but definitely there.

"Thank you for coming, Alec." She looked around and saw Stephen headed toward the telephone. "Will you take me home after we've talked to the police?"

"Of course." A note of surprise chimed in his voice. "Do you usually go home alone?"

"Most of the time. I often stay late and catch up on the books."

She saw elation sweep quickly over his face as he realized she'd not committed herself to Lovernios. Then almost instant regret. He must have realized he could not speak for himself. Or would not, she thought. Yes, definitely "would" not. His mind opened to her so she didn't need her Druid power. Still, this was important and she'd wanted to be sure. Alec was making a mistake affecting the happiness of them both, but she wouldn't disturb his mind. Glance into it, yes. But never try to change it.

She smiled sincerely at Stephen as he came back. "The police will be here immediately," he said.

Vivie steeled herself for the dismaying prospect of turning Wheeler over to the police. It must be done. And then she'd see Alec one last time when he took her home.

Somehow, deep in her subconscious, she knew it would be the last time she'd see him as they now were. Her Druid mind also realized, her heart plummeting to her shoes, she would soon see him again in a different setting. One destroying the sweet and haunting relationship they now enjoyed.

Her secrets were all about to be revealed.

She withdrew into her own private world until all the formalities were met and the police took a shaking and mumbling Wheeler away. Then she turned to Stephen.

"I'll see you tomorrow, Stephen. You've been wonderful as always. We have a lot of cleanup to do, but I think we can still care for our patients without it bothering them too much. Thank you again, my very dear friend."

His Druid eyes showed he recognized his dismissal meant more than simply a good night. He bowed over her hand in the courtly fashion of bygone years.

"Good night, Vivie. Blessed be."

She flushed at his quick understanding and turned to Alec.

"Shall we go?" she asked brightly. "It's been a long and distressing day."

Alec held out his hand to her and engulfed her small one in both of his, holding it for just a moment as he looked in her eyes, she thought for signs of fatigue.

"Yes. Let's go."

He dropped one of his hands and with the other led her out of the smoky, blackened building. She went without a backward look. She would have another small and wonderful period of time with Alec. She would do with it what she could.

It would be all the time she'd be with him for some while. Possibly, very possibly, forever.

Her deceptions were about to catch up with her.

Chapter Eleven

Alec held her hand tightly all the while they stood on the curb and he waited to flag down a taxi. Vivie uttered not a word. Knowing in her heart this was the last time she'd be with him as Vivie Field. She faltered, torn between dread for what came next in their relationship and wanting to treasure every present minute.

The minute they entered the cab he turned and took her in his arms.

"Vivie, I've never been so terrified. That damned Wheeler won't trouble you again, but by God he's got a lot to answer for. I'll testify against him with pleasure this time."

He kissed her forehead and then, as she tilted up her face and placed her hands on his shoulders, her willing lips.

He didn't try to resist her. He captured her mouth in one of those blazing kisses that haunted her nights and sometimes her days. Once again and she feared for the last time, she felt the gut-jolting pleasure only he could induce. She wrapped her arms around him and willed him to continue these glorious moments. He did, groaning as he showered little kisses all over her face and then settled on her ardent mouth.

For the space of a heartbeat she felt him withdraw as he tried to marshal his formidable strength to resist her blatant invitation.

She would not have it.

She angled her lips under his and kissed him with renewed fervor. With a groan, he pushed her down on the seat of the cab and followed her with his agile body, pinning her with his impressive strength, laying her almost flat.

Vivie vibrated with delight. She'd thought she possessed some power over him, but the extent of her power was thrilling beyond any of her dreams. His erection pressed like an iron rod against her stomach and she fastened her lips on his, willing him to take her even further into the ecstasy she sensed hovering near.

He probed her lips with his tongue and she opened to him. Anything he wanted she'd be glad to accept. She didn't know how much scope the backseat of a cab offered, but certainly they weren't the first amorous couple the cabbie had driven around. She fought with all her untested wiles against Alec's control, the control she longed to break.

She threw her arms around him and held him close as she opened her lips and let him in. For a wonderful few moments he probed her every crevice. She could feel his desperate need as he kissed her with his lips and his tongue. He lightly caressed her breasts, leaning down and kissing her neck as far as her exposed skin allowed. She tried to arch her lower body even closer as his touch aroused all her senses. She loved his smell, part citrus but mostly a male muskiness that was Alec, his special heat searing

through her thin blouse. He tasted like molten honey. His solid erection elated her beyond belief and she ran her hands over any part of him she could reach.

Suddenly, the ecstasy ended. He pushed himself from her and giving her his hand lifted her to a sitting position.

He placed his lips against her forehead, holding her lightly to him as he fought to get his breathing under control.

"Vivie," he finally breathed. "You must know how much I desire you. But I'll not dishonor you. I'm old-fashioned in a way I never realized."

"Not even if I want to be dishonored?"

He straightened and gave a shaky laugh. "You have no idea what you're saying, Vivie. But I know very well."

He turned and peered out the window. "Look, we're almost at your place."

His husky voice betrayed he was not at all interested in the view. He might, though, truly be glad they were almost at her destination. Probably better for them both. Or at least wiser.

She sat straighter and ran her hands through her hair.

"Whatever you say, Alec," was her only remark.

He gave a strangled laugh. Telling the driver to wait a moment, he sat holding her lightly in his arms, after pressing her head to his shoulder. Then with a light kiss on her lips, he got out of the cab and helped her descend.

"I needed one more kiss."

He said nothing else as he stood back and watched her enter Emily's vestibule. She stood watching in the doorway as he turned and stalked to the waiting cab.

Her heart sank, knowing she'd soon face him under her own persona. Miss Viviane Dellafield.

Utterly desolate, she tried to contemplate a future without Alec. She couldn't. She simply couldn't.

Chapter Twelve

She'd failed to break his control. Would it have been better or worse if she'd won the battle? Although she trembled with the memory of his scorching kisses, she reluctantly decided it was better he'd kept himself in rein. If he did not love her as Vivie Field, they had no future. Her heart seemed splintered in little pieces, impossible to ever glue together. Was this what was meant by a broken heart?

She worked so hard the next few weeks Stephen became alarmed. In fact all who loved her noticed her drawn face and regretted her evident unhappiness.

Emily spoke to her one night when they were both at home and sharing a dinner Emily conjured up from the nearest grocery. Vivie didn't expect her to cook, as Emily made no pretensions at such a skill. But she could gather ingredients, put them on a plate and add bread and dessert from the bakery.

"We'll have to do better than this if we ever marry," laughed Vivie. "No man is happy without a six-course meal."

"Well, we both can afford cooks if we want," said Emily.

"Yes. I know," said Vivie.

Emily put down her fork. "Vivie, you sound so depressed. Don't tell me you haven't told the luscious Dr. Stratton who you really are? I can't believe you'd be so dense."

Vivie tore a little piece off her bread, but put it on her plate instead of in her mouth.

"I haven't," she admitted. "I know it's all about to crash down on my head, but I just can't bring myself to tell him. Our relationship will change forever when I tell him. Now I know whatever he says is sincere, even if I don't like what he's saying."

Emily stared at her. "But I thought you were in love with him!"

"I guess I am. Certainly if thinking about him night and day is being in love, then I am. I don't like it very much. It's not a bit comfortable."

Emily looked at her, pity and friendship both in her eyes. "Vivie, you should tell him. It's worrying you to death and you know he's bound to find out."

"I know," Vivie murmured. "I'm miserable about it, but I just can't figure out what to do."

Emily put down her fork and stared at her. Emily, a petite blonde whose fragile appearance showed no sign of her actual strength, seldom gave advice. Now she glared at Vivie as if she were the village idiot. Vivie had to smile at the sight of her delicate friend looking so infuriated. If Vivie didn't already know how Emily wrestled big blocks of stone around it would be even funnier. Emily looked as if a good puff of wind would topple her sideways.

"Vivie, you're supposed to be super-intelligent. Go to him. If you have any hope for this relationship, be honest with him."

Vivie played again with her bread, methodically tearing it into even smaller pieces. "I don't want him to love me for my position and money. Although I'm pretty sure I could secure him if he knew I had both."

Her muffled voice showed her misery and Emily heard the soft undertones.

"That's pitiful, if you really think he's that superficial. But what he thinks has nothing to do with your honesty, Vivie."

"I know," she said. "What do you imagine keeps me awake nights?"

"What does Kate say?"

"It's really strange, but I can't reach her right now. I'm worried something might be wrong in Paris."

Emily huffed with impatience and got up to get more butter. "Fix what you can fix. Go talk to Alec Stratton."

Vivie looked up, her miserable face showing both relief at finally making a decision and dread at how Alec would react.

"I will," she said and went to get her coat. "May my Goddess go with me."

Emily snorted. "Rely on yourself, silly."

* * * * *

Vivie realized her nervous state when she found herself biting her lower lip so she wouldn't yell at the taxi driver. He wasn't really driving too fast but they were arriving at London Hospital sooner than she wanted. She still hadn't determined how to bring up the subject of her identity when she walked into Alec's office.

"Miss Field!"

Linda, Alec's secretary, looked up with pleasure on her open Irish face. "I expect you came to see Dr. Stratton."

Vivie's nerves weren't quite so jangly now she'd come to the point of action.

"Yes, if he's not too busy. But I can wait if he is."

Dear Goddess, she hoped he stayed busy for at least an hour! Maybe by then she'd have her mind in order.

"Oh, I'm so sorry, Miss Field. He left early and won't be back 'til tomorrow. Something about needing to buy something for a big to-do tonight."

A calm descended on Vivie as her mind cleared. Alec doubtless went out to buy some formal wear for the dinner-dance at Emily's parents'. Or even a corsage for his date. She and Emily were promised to go. For a moment she wondered which debutante would bring Alec. Or maybe a post-debutante? She'd soon find out. She felt her real world racing to catch up with her.

She turned to Linda with her biggest smile. "Linda, I've got an important favor to ask of you. Tomorrow, no matter what, will you tell Dr. Stratton Vivie called?"

Linda's blue eyes widened. "Of course, Miss Field."

"No, Vivie. Not Miss Field. I want him to know Vivie called with something to tell him. It's important you tell him just that. Vivie came in about something important."

The poor girl looked baffled, but said she'd be sure to pass the message on.

Vivie left thinking she could do no more until she saw Alec tonight. She dreaded the dinner with a loathing for the affair and for herself. She'd certainly spend extra time getting ready. It could be vital she looked her best. Even if Alec turned and walked away, there was a chance her image would stay with him until he calmed down. And she had a chance to explain why she'd done what she'd done. If only she could talk to him one more time after he found out how deceitful she'd been.

She hoped for the "one more time" with all her heart.

* * * * *

She'd never dressed with so much care, nor with such escalating dread. Her gown of sea-green chiffon floated around her. She wore her own pearls and long dangly pearl earrings. More pearls were twined in her hair and her dress swirled at her ankles with every step. She'd done the best she could. She never doubted she would confront Alec at the party.

She finally went into Emily's small foyer, finding Emily already there and looking spectacular. Like a fairy from another land, without a thought in her beautiful head. Vivie almost smiled. More than one man had pursued Emily and found he didn't meet her exacting intellectual standards.

"Wow!" Emily involuntary exclamation helped a little with Vivie's jitters. "You look unbelievable!"

Vivie couldn't resist teasing her friend. "Just what I'm afraid of. Alec won't believe me!"

"Big joke, Vivie. Come, let's go. My parents will never forgive me if I'm any later than this."

They were not too late, although the party was spinning with gaiety when they arrived. Emily's parents, her father Lord Brandon and his second wife, Margaret, spotted them almost at once and came to welcome them. Emily was on good terms with Margaret, an astonishing look-alike to Emily's mother and Vivie smiled as Emily kissed Margaret's cheek with enthusiasm. Her father had moped for four years after his first wife's death and Emily felt grateful now for her father's happiness.

Her father kissed her and then held her a little away from him. "I'll never understand how you wrestle those chunks of marble around. You look ten years old and about as strong."

Emily's laughter rang through the hall. "Thank you, I think, Papa."

Both Lord and Lady Brandon welcomed Vivie. "I've got a wonderful surprise for you, Vivie. Your father and mother are here. And of course your grandparents. But getting your parents to be this frivolous is quite an accomplishment."

Vivie hoped her face didn't show her conflicting emotions. She loved her parents dearly and was delighted to know they were here. They were in the country as much as possible, although they came to town when Parliament stood in session. She should have expected them when his parents' good friends were entertaining. Still they would be unwelcome witnesses to the coming debacle.

She danced with several old friends, all wanting to know why they hadn't seen her and how they could reach her. She fended them off. They were mostly wealthy, innocuous, nice young men, but they were not Alec.

She'd just stepped on the dance floor when she saw Alec come to the edge of the crowded space and hold out his hand to a tall blonde. Cissie Rutherford! She should have known Cissie would spot a handsome doctor who seemed to have an impressive future. Vivie stumbled and apologized to Richie for being so clumsy. She knew the instant Alec spotted her. He flushed and then grew pale. His eyes were fixed on her as Cissie tugged at him.

He looked unbearably handsome in evening clothes. Her heart sank at the realization he was even more impressive tonight than she'd ever seen him. How unfair could life be?

Time to get it over with. She took Richie's hand and led him to the edge of the floor.

"Hullo, Alec," she said simply. "May I introduce Lord Richmond? Hello, Cissie, how are you?"

"Vivie," Cissie shrieked. Vivie tried not to wince. She'd always hated Cissie's tendency to screech. "Nobody's seen you for ages! Oh, let me introduce Dr. Stratton to you both. Vivie Dellafield, Alec and the Earl of Richmond."

"I know Miss, Miss Dellafield, is it? How do you do, sir," Alec said to Richie. His voice was utterly devoid of feeling. Almost as if a mannequin were speaking, but Vivie could sense all too clearly the anger seething in him. She prayed to the Goddess he would control it. He almost overflowed with fury.

"Yes, it's Dellafield, Alec." She fixed her eyes on his incensed face. For the life of her she couldn't think of a thing to say. All her preparation, her practiced speeches, her apologies, all went winging out the window.

"Alec! Then you know each other. How interesting. You never told me, Alec, you bad boy. But then I suppose you met at the hospital. Of course, that's it, isn't it, you naughty things?"

Cissie tried to tuck her arm through Alec's but he stepped away from her.

"If you'll excuse us, Cissie, I have some information I forgot to give Miss Dellafield at the hospital today."

He grabbed Vivie's hand and started to pull her away before Cissie clutched his sleeve.

"Surely it's not private, Alec. We'll just stay together and you can talk to Vivie as much as you want. Although I hope you don't get too boring with all your medical jargon."

"Oh, but it is private, Cissie." His face was a rigid mask frightening Vivie more than open anger. "We never divulge a patient's details, you know. Quite against medical discipline. Come along, Miss Dellafield."

He removed Cissie's clutching hand and grabbed forcibly at Vivie's.

Vivie let him lead her away. He was angry enough to throw her over his shoulder and carry her off if she didn't. Even so he was walking so fast she could barely keep up.

He dragged her along the hall, opening one door and then slamming it and finally opening another and pulling her in. No, shoved her in. And then turned to face her, his icy face showing nothing but contempt. And a hurt deep in his eyes that fractured her heart.

"I suppose you think this is a big joke, Miss Dellafield. Deceiving everybody at the hospital. I imagine your grandmother you speak so fondly of is the Duchess of Lambden who has generously contributed to my work? And probably paid for your clinic, come to think of it. Is she Vivie? Tell the truth for once."

She braced her hands against the desk she found herself backed into.

"Yes, Alec. Although it's my Druid grandmother who's responsible for my interest in all kinds of medicine. I never lied to you except for shortening my name. Do you think I'd have been able to go through a normal training if it were known my grandparents are the Duke and Duchess of Lambden? Paths would have been miraculously cleared for me and I'd have no idea of how truly tough it is to be a nurse. Or learned to be a good one. Oh and while I'm at it, my father is Lord Laniston Dellafield, the eminent member of the House of Commons."

"My God," Alec said. "How could you? I grant your point while taking training. But couldn't you have told me? Some time later? I thought we were closer than this kind of deception."

The pain in his beautiful face nearly undid her. She shook her head to clear the tears from her own eyes, but faced him squarely.

"When Alec? When you kissed me, but told me you wanted a wife of higher birth than me? And one with more money? Or should it have been when you took me home after the clinic fires and I hoped you finally showed signs of wanting me for myself? But you said nothing of what I wanted to hear. Should I have told you then and hoped it would force you to speak of love?"

He flushed, although this time she thought it might be contempt for himself as well as her.

“You let, no, you helped me make a complete fool of myself. And you lied to me. Every day you didn’t tell me you lied to me.”

She drew a long quivering breath. “Yes. I agree with you. Will it help if I tell you how very sorry I am?”

He moved off a little, shaking his head. She reached out a hand to touch him, but he shuddered and moved beyond her reach.

“It doesn’t help at all right now. Maybe it will later. Right now the only thing I’m sorry about is I ever met you.”

She dashed the tears from her eyes with the back of her hand.

“I went to your office today to tell you. You might ask your secretary about the message I left.”

She fumbled in her evening purse and found a small handkerchief. She wasn’t sure it would be enough, but darned if she’d ask to borrow his. He’d turned his back to her and his head was bowed. His shoulders were set stiffly and as unappeasable as mountain boulders. He didn’t comment on her last remark, just stood rigidly in his fury.

She quietly left the room.

Alec didn’t raise his head. Right now he felt barely capable of breathing. The constriction in his chest nearly strangled him. Dammed if he’d shed tears over a lying Delilah.

He knew Vivie was leaving and he stood without motion. He was incapable of doing anything at all. Right before she shut the door he heard a deep voice speaking.

“Vivie darling, you look upset.”

Chapter Thirteen

Alec leaned his head against the wall. So, on top of everything else she was some other man's darling. How could he have been so wrong about her? How could he? Even now her lovely face hovered in front of his eyes, her own gorgeous green ones pleading with him to listen to her.

He would like to stay here until it was time to go home. Better yet, he'd like to dash for home this minute. He couldn't. He squared his shoulders and went out the door to look for Cissie. Cissie, who'd made her interest in him plain. He cherished no doubts he could easily find his way into her bed. He'd no desire for anyone but Vivie, fool that he was.

Just as he stepped into the hall he saw Vivie folded in the embrace of a very tall, very handsome older man, while she buried her head in his shoulder and cried without restraint. The little tart hadn't wasted much time going for sympathy, damn her. He'd a mind to tear her out of his embrace and plant the decadent bastard a good one.

Before he could move he heard the detestable deep voice again.

"My darling child, look at me. Who has upset you like this?"

"Oh, Papa. I'm so miserable. I've been such an idiot."

Alec stopped still. Papa? Darling child? His senses finally alert, he noticed the sprinkling of grey in the man's hair. His authoritative bearing showing through his with concern for his child. His child! The man was even now mopping at Vivie's face with a big handkerchief. This had to be Lord Lance Dellafield and Alec felt like a miserable fool once again. He stood unmoving, praying not to be noticed.

Lord Lance cocked an eyebrow at the younger man.

"Vivie?" he asked simply, as he dried her eyes again and turned her toward Alec.

"Oh no," she said. Then she rallied like the aristocratic lady she was. She swallowed a big gulp.

"Papa, this is Dr. Alec Stratton. From the hospital. Alec, please meet my father, Lord Lance Dellafield."

Her breeding clearly proved her to be the lady he now knew she was. Her voice quivered almost out of control at first and then strengthened.

Alec feared his face flamed fiery red, but he stepped forward and grasped Lord Lance's hand.

"It truly is a pleasure to meet you, sir. I'm a great admirer of your speeches in the House of Commons."

Lord Lance shook hands, looking first at Vivie and then back at Alec.

“Thank you, Doctor. I’ll reserve further comments ‘til I speak with my daughter. If you’ll excuse us, sir. I’m not good at unexpected situations until I get some briefing. I have the impression this one is fraught with difficulties.”

Lord Lance put his arm around his daughter’s shoulders and led her away, murmuring to her as they went.

My God, Lord Lance was the most impressive man he’d ever met. For almost the first time, Alec made no instant assessment of how someone might help his career. He was lost in admiration. He only knew Lord Lance Dellafield possessed every quality he’d like to have. As a person. An untouchable integrity shone from his controlled features. An intellect one rarely had the privilege to meet was obvious in every aspect of his bearing and demeanor.

And then Alec remembered Vivie’s devastated face. Her long eyelashes spiked from her recent weeping. Her sodden handkerchief clutched in her hand, as she’d stood clutching her father. She was not naturally deceitful. She’d not planned this deception to deliberately ensnare him into a grotesque kind of web his imagination built in his always suspicious mind.

She was not the bitch he’d convinced himself just ten minutes ago she was. Still she’d not trusted him with a most basic part of her. Her name.

He pulled himself up with a jerk. He was being unpardonably rude to Cissie. He couldn’t think of anything he wanted less than to go back in the ballroom, but he was obligated. Cissie was obviously interested in him and so far he’d held her off. Maybe he should reconsider. She’d been honest. At least as far as he knew. Although maybe all women were natural deceivers.

He’d danced with Cissie, met all her feather-headed friends and realized if he so wished he’d found the rich aristocratic wife he wanted. He’d be foolish to pass her by. He found her waiting for him and held his arms out to her with a smile. He bent his head over hers and flirted with her as he swept her around the dance floor.

Regardless of the treachery of Miss Vivie Dellafield, he possessed the entry to the world he wanted right in his arms. He would not consider it was Vivie’s world too. At last he could see clear sailing to the goal he’d held so long, the ambition of achieving the enviable position of one of society’s most preferred doctors. Not to mention the wealth bound to accompany his goal. There was no reason for him to be even slightly depressed.

He twirled Cissie around and around. He didn’t hear a word of her incessant prattling.

Out of the corner of his eye he saw Lord Lance Dellafield go up to a beautiful and older lady. His brief glimpse told him she looked a lot like Vivie, although her hair was a lighter color. Lady Lance, no doubt. They both turned away from the room. Just before they left he saw the Duke and Duchess of Lambden join them, as the Duchess took one of Vivie’s hands and the Duke the other and they walked her out.

Blast and damn. He didn't even want to think about the Dellafields. He'd met the charming Duchess of Lambden several times and he didn't think her the type to consider his relationship with her granddaughter in her assessment of his abilities. She seemed to sincerely appreciate his ability and she was above all a lady. Still, he could be wrong. All the more reason to sew up Cissie before she caught on she might be his last chance. If necessary he could start his practice sooner than he'd planned.

He should secure Cissie. Right now he didn't have the heart, but he'd do it soon.

He teetered on the verge of accomplishing the dream he'd cherished ever since he started clawing his way out of the Boston ghetto. The dream keeping him going when everything and everybody seemed against him. He couldn't let it all slip now, no matter how his heart persisted in throbbing with an excruciating ache for the deceitful Miss Viviane Dellafield.

Why couldn't she have told him and saved them both this anguish? His anger lessened, but not his feeling of heart-wrenching regret. How could she have done this to them both?

They could have been so happy if she'd only trusted him.

Chapter Fourteen

When Alec went to the hospital the next day he found his secretary eager to give him the strange message from the beautiful and friendly Miss Field.

“Although I couldn’t make sense out of it. She was determined to have me tell you it was Vivie, not Miss Field who’d asked for you and to be sure you knew she’d come with something important to tell you. Doesn’t make sense to me, Doctor, but I promised her I’d be careful to get the message straight. She’s such a lovely person.”

“Thank you, Miss Summers.”

He said nothing else. There was little he could say, after all. Except he knew very well what the strange message meant and Vivie had indeed come to tell him her true name. It lessened the sense of betrayal a little. But for some reason not the hurt. It might not be logical, but he felt devastated. If she’d only told him she could have helped him fulfill his dream. And they could have been together.

The thought of what might have been almost sent him to his knees.

He’d known very well not to let a woman into his heart. Perhaps it was for the best. At least he’d never confided in her about his background. Surely such an aristocrat would have laughed him out of the room if she’d known what he really was. Disdain from her would be more than he could endure and keep his sanity.

She did not call. He hadn’t really expected her to, although a little part of him hoped.

He worked very hard for three weeks. And then he placed a call to Lady Cissie Rutherford. Who shrieked her delight at hearing from him.

Alec flinched but asked her to have dinner with him and to wear something glamorous as he wanted to make it a special night. He made reservations at the Savoy, shoving to the back of his mind another invitation he’d once issued to the restaurant where all Cissie’s friends liked to eat. By God, was that why Vivie had not wanted to appear there with him? Afraid she might be exposed too early in the game? Another thought that nearly choked him.

He exchanged his white coat for a civilian one. He intended to show up at the Rutherfords’ with the biggest diamond he could find. He needed to go shopping.

Afterward he thought he might as well not have bothered. Cissie would have accepted him with a much lesser stone. Or no stone at all. In fact her obvious glee bothered him. He did not, definitely did not, want an adoring wife. Or was her delight merely satisfaction she’d landed her trophy?

* * * * *

For Vivie the days after her confrontation with Alec seemed to creep by. She couldn't stop hoping the phone would ring with his beloved rich voice, or he'd drop her a line saying he'd thought about it and realized how difficult her position had been.

She couldn't keep busy enough to stop the incessant expectation. She wasn't optimistic, although it seemed incredible to her he'd not recognize her pain and at least try to see her viewpoint. Or give her a chance to explain to him more thoroughly.

When Emily came in one morning at breakfast with a face plainly speaking of distress, Vivie's heart sank to the floor. If there'd been anything beneath the floor it would have sunk there too. She knew. Alec had taken some irrevocable step that would forever separate them. She didn't know yet what he'd done, but he was gone from her. For all of time.

She raised anguished eyes to Emily, who stood holding the morning *Times* in her hand.

"You might as well tell me, Emily. It's Alec, I know. Is it Cissie?"

Emily dropped to her knees beside her good friend.

"Yes, it is. Yes. The stupid bastard. He's engaged to Lady Priscilla Rutherford. She'll make his life a misery. He deserves it."

Vivie's face might have been chiseled from concrete.

"You might be wrong, Emily. He doesn't love her and so she'll have little power over him. Although she'll use the position and social power to try to control him. Yes, on second thought you could be right. She'll make him miserable."

"Love, I'm so very sorry."

"Thank you, Emily."

Vivie got to her feet and left the room. The frozen mask of her face never changed expression and her friend looked after her in consternation. Emily thought she might easily geld Dr. Alecander Stratton if she ever had the chance. Or at least choke him 'til he begged for mercy.

From that day Vivie never mentioned Alec's name. If Emily did, she left the room. Silently. Emily thought of informing Lance and Morgan Dellafield, but knew Vivie would regard that as unforgivable. Even so, she'd do it, except she didn't know what even Vivie's parents could do to truly help.

She needn't have been concerned. Vivie's parents, as well as both sets of grandparents, were well aware of the heartache of their beloved Vivie. As was Kate, who for the first time found herself unable to touch Vivie's mind. She told Vivie she loved her and ached for her misery and Vivie merely thanked her for her concern. No confidences as they were used to sharing. None at all.

Only Stephen seemed able to reach her. He joked with her and teased her, all the while regarding her with eyes she normally would have recognized as devastated. As long as she responded to him in any way at all he seemed to want to help her.

She stayed as kind and caring of her patients as ever. If Stephen thought her overly concerned and definitely overworking he didn't mention his worries. He concentrated on bringing a smile to her face as often as possible. He deeply regretted the smile seldom reached her eyes.

One morning she came to him, her lovely face stressed with anxiety.

"I've got a little girl here, Stephen, I wish you'd come look at her. I think it's inflamed tonsils, but she's so sick I'd like your opinion."

"Of course, love," he said easily, as he followed her to the bedside of a girl he'd guess to be about nine or ten. Far too thin, with eyes sunk deep in her head. He sank to his knees beside her bed.

"Well, aren't you the prettiest thing I've seen since Sleeping Beauty. What's your name, you gorgeous creature?"

The little girl almost choked on her giggles, before she looked up at him and whispered, "Amanda, Doctor."

"And I'll guess your whisper is not so much to lure me into your castle but because you can't talk any louder. Am I right, Princess?"

At her delighted nod he kept on with his outrageous chatter, getting her to open her mouth for him while he probed deeply. She didn't even seem to notice as her adoring eyes were fixed on him the whole time.

"You're a darling girl," he whispered to her. "Let me go talk to Nurse Vivie and we'll see what we can do to make you feel better. You just close your eyes and rest a little, sweetheart."

She smiled at him in childish adoration as he kissed her forehead and then closed her eyes as he'd requested.

He motioned Vivie into the next room, his face no longer smiling.

"Vivie, I pray to the Goddess you can find a way to help me. She's one very ill child."

Vivie took his hand and squeezed it, her own face worried. "I know, Stephen. She's thin almost to her bones. How do you want me to help?"

"I'm going to ask you to do something which might be completely impossible. Even for you. If it is, just say so."

He paused and ran his big hand over his face.

"I hate to even ask you. It's dangerous for you, I suspect, but I can think of nothing else."

Chapter Fifteen

Stephen started to pace and Vivie watched him for a moment, growing more and more alarmed. Such concern from Stephen frightened her.

"I want you to keep her quiet while I take her tonsils out, Vivie. Without an anesthetic."

Vivie jolted. "Stephen, I know you must have a good reason for asking me something so drastic, but why not give her a little anesthesia?"

His face got even grimmer as he answered her. "I looked at her record. She's suffered one attack after the other these last few years, according to her mother. I think she has little reserve strength. She also has a definite irregularity in her heartbeat I'm not sure you noticed. Anesthesia is out of the question."

"Dear Goddess, let me think, Stephen." She bowed her head, closed her eyes and said nothing. After a few moments of deep concentration, she spoke again. "My grandmother says I can do it. At least I'll try. Although I've never attempted anything like this before."

His relief showed in his mobile face. "What will you do, Vivie? I'm sure you can do whatever it is, but as a fellow Druid I'd like to know. I just wish I possessed a quarter of your talents, love."

Vivie brushed his comments aside.

"I plan to take a little trip in my mind. I'll take Amanda with me. It's the only thing I can think of that might work. I haven't quite decided where we're going, but I'll know by the time you're ready to operate. Will her parents go along with this?"

"I think they will, especially after I talk to them. It's her only chance, Vivie. She won't last another winter. But I still don't understand what you plan."

"I'm going to try to link our minds so when I mentally go to another place, I can take her along."

"My God, Vivie."

His voice plainly showed his awe and respect, but with no doubt in it at all. His voice dropped to a whisper no louder than Amanda's.

"My our Goddess be with you. Be very careful, Vivie."

* * * * *

Vivie sat nearby during the conference with Amanda's parents, who said little and then asked to think it over. The next day they returned to the clinic, still visibly distraught. Plainly the father was much against the operation and his wife's tears had

worn him down. Neither one seemed to have much faith anything could now help their daughter. They held hands while the mother gave their consent. Both looked pitiful and without hope.

Stephen made no attempt to explain Vivie's part in it, only using vague terms about some kind of mental control often practiced through the ages. Neither Stephen nor Vivie knew positively, but it seemed probable. Certainly Druids were long aware one could divorce oneself from pain, but taking another along with them appeared new, at least to Stephen. Vivie's grandmother Viviane assured her it was not unknown and she'd be helping her granddaughter all the while. She didn't tell Vivie the best help she could give her was confidence in her own ability.

Stephen scheduled the operation the next day and Viviane tried to prepare herself. She'd worried herself to sleeplessness during the night, but in the morning she was calm and smiling. The blessed calm stayed with her, as she took Amanda's small, thin hand in hers. She and Stephen had physically prepared the child as far as possible and Stephen was standing nearby with sterilized hands and instruments. Now everything depended on Vivie.

She kissed the little girl's forehead and spoke in her brightest voice.

"Lovey, you and I are going on a little journey in our minds. We'll have a wonderful time. I'll bet you've never seen the ocean, have you?"

"Oooh no, Miss Vivie. I'd love to go. Are we really going to see the water? You said you'd surprise me."

Vivie's smile was sweetly genuine. All fear left her. She patted the little girl's hand and smiled with a gem-like joy.

"I think you'll love the ocean. You must be careful of one thing. Don't try to pull your hand from mine. We have to do this together and I'm looking forward to it so much. If you take your hand away I'll have to come back too."

She signaled Stephen and said gaily, "Here we go, lovely child. Hang on tight!"

She began to describe what they were seeing in an excited voice.

"I thought we'd just drop by Brighton first so we could see the Brighton Palace where one of our former kings built an absolutely amazing palace not too long ago. It's close to the ocean so we won't lose much time getting to the water and the waves. King George built it here because he also loved the ocean. It's a fairyland of fancy buildings. Would you like to see them a little closer?"

She didn't wait for the child's enthusiastic nod, but began to describe King George IV's extravaganza of a palace he'd built as Prince Regent. Since she'd seen it several times, she knew the fantastic turrets would interest a child with their fairytale appearance. Every time she saw those soaring spires they impressed her as almost unbelievable.

"Oh look, there are no real roofs at all. Oh, there are roofs, but they're shaped so funny. A lot of them look like upside-down onions. Some of them look just like tents that are made out of stone and wood. And some of the walls are bright with little

colored tiles like in the games we play, but these tiles are made of glass. Did you ever see such a bright building? See how the light shines off? It looks like someplace the Queen of the Fairies and all her court lived in. All those funny and different kinds of roofs. It's very, very big, isn't it? Bigger than any building I'd ever seen."

She took a deep breath and went on with hardly a pause. "Shall we peek inside? Oh, do look Amanda, the iron posts supporting the ceiling in this giant of a kitchen have leaves at the top so the poles look just like tall palm trees. You've never seen a palm tree before, have you? Aren't they the funniest looking trees? So much trunk and almost no leaves. Just a tall, tall trunk and no green except at the very top. And the chandeliers in the main entertaining room. Look at those, Amanda. Aren't they gorgeous, with all those thousands of little pieces of glass twinkling in the lights? Aren't you glad we came here first?"

At the child's nod Stephen knew Vivie was succeeding and proceeded a little deeper into her throat. He couldn't spare the concentration, but a few of the words drifted into his mind and he knew the pair were now at the ocean. Vivie squealed at the big waves and telling Amanda not to be afraid, assured her she'd hold her hand even more tightly.

Smart, smart girl, Stephen thought. Amanda wouldn't relax her grip now.

Vivie's word drifted to the laboring doctor.

"Oh, the ocean is so big. We can't see where it ends at all. It's just water and water and more water until it meets the sky. And the beautiful blue-green color of the ocean. Did you ever see so lovely a color before? Look, farther out the color turns almost grey. And the sound of the waves slapping on the shore. It's so gentle today we can easily go wading. The salty odor in the air is funny and you smell it only at the ocean, you know, because the water is so salty."

Finally Vivie decided it would be all right to take off their shoes and socks and wade a little in the frothy waves. Vivie took off Amanda's first, at least in her story and squealed again as she described how funny the sand felt between their toes. Stephen's admiration for Vivie grew into wonder when Amanda jerked as Stephen snipped at the tonsils. Vivie reacted quickly, holding the child still with her words.

"No, no, Mandy, don't let go of my hand. I just stepped on a big rock and it hurt a little. I need you to help me by hanging onto me. I guess you felt a rock too. Maybe we should slow down and just enjoy the water slithering through our toes. It feels so bubbly when the waves go back out. Isn't this wonderful?"

She talked and talked, on and on, until finally Stephen had finished and motioned to her. At first he couldn't get her attention, but when he did she smiled wanly.

"Mandy, I'm tired. Let's both take a little nap. Dipping in the ocean can wear one out, you know."

Stephen took off his surgical gloves and gently uncurled Vivie's fingers one by one from her clutch on the little girl's. Vivie leaned into him and then slumped motionless

in his arms. Regardless of the blood on his coat, he lifted her high against him for a moment before reverently placing her on the next bed.

"Blessed be, my darling. Have a good sleep." His low whisper must have reached her, for she smiled, although she didn't open her eyes.

He turned to the child to give her a little hops tea to dim the pain and control any throat spasms.

When Vivie woke up she found Stephen by the next bed spooning ice cream down Amanda's very sore throat and telling her not to try to talk. She could have all the ice cream she wanted for the next few days. She just mustn't worry at all about her throat as it would soon feel better.

The little girl's eyes rounded at the promise of such a treat. Vivie sat up, ignoring Stephen's worried look.

"I think I deserve ice cream too, Dr. Stephen. I got just as cold in the water as Amanda did."

Stephen looked in her eyes and saw her normal smile and then she winked at him. He had to swallow very hard before he answered.

"I'll get some for you too, Nurse Vivie. I think you've both been very good girls."

He kissed both their cheeks and went off to fulfill his promise. He practically bounded out of the room. He couldn't remember ever feeling as grateful as when Vivie opened those gorgeous green eyes. Her Goddess and her grandmother both must have protected her on such a risky journey.

She'd succeeded, but he'd never, ever ask her again. He'd not seriously understood the cost to her. It was far too dangerous for her to try even once more.

* * * * *

Vivie took a day off, sleeping almost twenty hours. Her reaction when she woke was at first elation. Amanda would have a chance to grow normally. And she, Vivie, now knew her powers almost equaled her grandmother's. Not her wisdom, but her powers.

She buried her face in her pillow, as the errant thought bore down on her. She wished she could tell Alec. But he was not only beyond her reach, he'd probably reject her whole story.

When she returned to her duties in the clinic she did so with a new certainty and a fresh calmness of spirit. Alec had damaged her heart but he'd not broken her strength. She knew now peace lay in using her powers to help others as much as she possibly could.

She found many opportunities for her Druid talents. A small boy broke his leg and his parents carried him in screaming. She reached into his mind to calm him, taking some of the pain to herself and stayed with him until Stephen could get the bones set and a splint applied. Her selflessness occurred so many times Stephen finally rebelled.

Watching her eyes grow ever more racked with the pain she was assuming, he forbid her to help with surgical patients unless he called for her.

Of course she paid no attention.

As she grew ever thinner and paler, Stephen finally consulted Emily, whom he'd grown to like a good deal as a friend.

"I simply don't know what to do, Emily. She's assuming too much of the patients' pain, trying to ease their burden. As a result, I'm seriously concerned for her."

"As her friend, or as a doctor?"

He grinned a rather lopsided grin. "Both. I love her, as you must know, although I have no illusions she'll ever truly love me. When that damned Stratton took himself out of the picture I cherished some hope for a while. I guess I still do. If she'll let me take care of her I won't demand the same kind of love I feel for her."

Emily looked at him, wishing Vivie would reconsider her unconditional love for Stratton. Stephen was every bit as handsome and with a winning personality Stratton would never have. And Stephen worshipped Vivie.

"Vivie is surrounded by love, you know. Her family adores her, as they do Kate. Does Vivie mention Kate at all? Usually Kate is her biggest consolation."

"I have the impression Vivie's shut her mind to everyone but her patients. She opens up a little to her Druid grandmother when she wants advice, but mostly she's shut herself away. She's exhausting herself."

Emily stared in dismay. "That's much worse than I thought. I assumed she and Kate were still close in their minds. If Vivie's closed out Kate then I'm truly concerned."

Stephen nodded. Frantically worried was more how he felt.

Vivie indeed cut off all thoughts except those she needed in her nursing. There she was in control. No matter her heartache, she determined to never let her emotions affect her work in any detrimental way. She found it much easier to control her thoughts when she was very busy. Naturally, she kept very busy. So many needed help, making it easy for her to immerse herself to the point not being able to think.

If she ran out of work she looked for more. One day she found Stephen sitting at his desk worrying over a young boy's lack of progress after he'd injured his leg playing rugby.

"What's the problem, Stephen?"

He shook his head. "I wish I knew. I got x-rays of his leg at the very beginning of the trouble and they showed nothing. I recommended he stay off it for a few days, but inactivity didn't help at all. I don't understand it. The leg's still hurting him badly."

Vivian stood silently for a few minutes. "May I see the boy?"

"Of course, Vivie. I don't know what to do next."

She stood silently over the boy for a long few minutes.

“I’m not sure what it is, but something is still wrong. I’ve probed the leg bones with my mind and I’m sure they need help. It’s not a happy leg. X-rays are still too new to be perfect. I think you should treat the leg as if there’s a slight fracture not showing up on the x-ray.”

Stephen never thought to question her diagnosis, although the boy wasn’t at all pleased with the idea of a cast. Stephen explained it wouldn’t be on too long, but they needed to know if a cast would help. When the pain diminished almost immediately, Stephen beamed at her.

“I don’t know quite how you do it. A lot of people would call it instinct, but as a Druid I know it’s much more. I wish I possessed your insight, or what I call your communications skills with the human body. Thank you, Vivie.”

She looked at him with a slight smile. “You could do it too, you know. You just have to put yourself, your whole self, in another place, in this case Willy’s leg and you can tell if everything is all right or not. There’s a certain unrest you can plainly feel. Why don’t you try?”

He laughed. “Vivie, love, I’ll leave it to you.”

And he strolled off to the next patient. She might call it easy, but he knew differently. He also more than suspected he did not have the strength of character or depth of empathy Miss Vivie Dellafield possessed in such abundance.

He felt privileged to know her and humbled he was allowed to help her in her exceptional care of patients.

He only wished every day did not demand more and more of her diminishing strength.

Chapter Sixteen

Although Stephen did what he could to help Vivie with any strenuous tasks, he still worried she was working herself dangerously close to exhaustion. One day when she showed up to begin her day at the clinic, he was waiting for her.

"Don't even bother to take off your coat, Miss Dellafield. We're taking the day off. Both of us."

She gave a sort of half-laugh. "Stephen, don't be ridiculous. We can't do any such thing."

"Oh yes we can, madam. I've arranged for two people from London Hospital to take our place today. Actually they think they'd like to work here and this is a good chance for us to try them out. Throw them right in the hot water, is my motto."

"Stephen! We can't!"

"You're getting monotonous, ma'am. Of course we can. You know I wouldn't let incompetent doctors through the door. Now come along. We are going to do nothing and do it all day."

He bundled her out the door, laughing and joking as he relentlessly placed her in the waiting cab. He concentrated on making sure the day was restful, leisurely and with no reference at all to sickness. In fact he adamantly refused to discuss the clinic.

They took a long walk in Hyde Park and fed the ducks. Vivie breathed a deep sigh and inhaled the autumn air.

"I swear I can smell wood smoke, although I don't know where from. And look at the leaves just starting to turn. Will the ducks stay here for the winter, do you think? I'd forgotten how peaceful it can be in the park. And how every season has its own feel and smell. I love autumn."

He watched the lines around her eyes relax a little and noticed with pleasure she was breathing deeply of the autumn scents surrounding them. Roasting chestnuts, a cool tang to the air, a freshness to the breeze swirling the few fallen leaves around the grass. As a Druid, she needed to observe nature's wonders often to revive her overworked spirit. She would wither without her connection to the earth. Next time he'd try to figure out a way to get her hands in some dirt. Druids needed a vital connection with the soil. However he managed, he resolved to see she somehow reestablished her earth ties more often.

He smiled from his heart as she gave a gasp of wonder.

"Stephen, look at the gorgeous web that spider is spinning. The light is just right to prism off it and show how wondrous it is. How very beautiful."

"It's a beautiful time of year," was his satisfied answer.

He hailed a horse-driven cab and they rode around aimlessly. They didn't talk much at first as Stephen relentlessly cut off any conversation about the clinic, newest developments in medicine, or their latest patients. Vivie finally literally and figuratively threw up her hands.

"Stephen, I never suspected you were such a tyrant. And a despotic one."

"Yes ma'am," he said. His meek voice was belied by his mischievous eyes. He tried to look stern as he continued.

"And now madam, you are going to be further abused. I want you to lay your head on my lap. Then I want you to close your eyes until I give you permission to open them. You are not to say a word while this dreadful torture is being afflicted."

His teasing eyes looked down at her, a little light in their depths she pretended not to see.

"Stephen!" she laughed even while she regarded him with uncertainty.

He let his tone show how seriously he meant his request. "Please, Vivie, just for a little while."

"Oh, all right," she grumbled. "Although I never in the world suspected a dictatorial Kaiser would capture me for the day."

The words sprang to his lips he wanted her for more than just one day, but he didn't utter them. She would never lie down and relax if he said what was always in his mind. For now he wanted her to rest.

She made a great to-do about arranging her skirts and then finally lay down with her head in his lap.

"Just close your eyes, little Druid. You know you have nothing to fear from me."

"Oh, of course I know that, Stephen," she grumbled. And then her impossibly long lashes closed over her emerald eyes.

"I'll humor you for just a few minutes," she muttered.

"Of course," he answered.

She fell asleep even faster than he'd expected. He longed to stroke her hair, or at least lean over and kiss it. But he was afraid to move. He'd planned carefully to give her extra rest and he was not about to give in to his selfish impulses and disturb her. Still, the speed with which she'd dropped off to sleep worried him. She was even more exhausted than he'd feared.

She slept for almost three hours. His legs were shooting sparks of pain before she woke, but he never budged. Vivie was so proud and would ordinarily accept no help. He gloried in the knowledge she'd relaxed because of him.

When she awoke she sat up quickly, flushing with mortification.

"Stephen, I've cost you a fortune in cab fare."

"Do you think I can figure out a way to take it out of the clinic budget?" he asked. "Having you in good health is certainly worth almost any price. You agree, don't you?"

He laughed and joked until she was forced to smile in return. Then he took her to dinner at a steakhouse, where he insisted she order everything fattening on the menu. Although she didn't finish her food, still he was satisfied. She was better off than she'd been twenty-four hours earlier.

Not much, but until she gave him permission to love her openly, he could do no more than be of occasional help.

* * * * *

The next day started with a new patient Vivie feared would be a problem. The girl, about seventeen years old, didn't particularly worry Vivie, but the mother did. The slight girl, with medium brown hair and big brown eyes, was quite attractive in a mousey sort of way.

The mother was another matter. Vivie found it difficult to picture the two as even related. Mrs. Chapman loomed big, pushy and loud. She completely dominated the interview while Vivie kept probing to find what problem brought them to her. The mother said her daughter had been upset and not herself for some time and broke into tears when questioned. Her mother thought it probably just adolescent nerves, but wanted to be sure. She obviously was highly suspicious of something more devastating than nerves.

After a while, Vivie turned to them both with her sweetest smile.

"I'll need to do an examination of Susan. Will you step this way, Susan?"

Susan rose, her face as frightened as any Vivie had seen for a good long while. Mrs. Chapman rose too, but Vivie put out her hand.

"I never do an examination with any one else present. One of the clinic's rules. Will you wait here, please, Mrs. Chapman?"

The woman looked so stunned Vivie swallowed her grin.

"But she's my daughter! Of course I'll accompany her."

"I'm so sorry, but it's one of our most rigid rules. We won't be long. I think we have some good magazines on the table over there."

Vivie swept out of the room ushering Susan before her. What she'd have done if the obnoxious mother insisted she didn't know. Yes, she did, she'd not have taken the case. Nothing could be accomplished with that warship of a mother alongside. Susan lived in obvious terror of her mother and probably with good reason.

"Sit down in the chair and let's talk for a while, Susan. You're what, about sixteen? Seventeen?"

At the girl's whispered "sixteen" Vivie realized she was only four years older. She felt of another generation.

"Is your father alive? Does he live with you and your mother?"

Susan didn't seem to realize how strange some of the questions were. Vivie strongly suspected the father had not been in the picture for some reason or other. Even if around he'd be completely cowed by his overbearing wife.

As it turned out her father left them both a few years ago. Susan confided with a deep blush she'd heard from some of her friends her father ran off with a pretty young woman. Hopefully more agreeable, Vivie thought. She also now knew some of the reasons Mrs. Chapman kept such a tight rein on Susan.

"Well, I need to examine you just a little, Susan. I want to feel your abdomen, but I don't think it will hurt. Probably I need do nothing more. Lie down on the couch, please. I'll try to feel through your clothing."

Vivie felt no surprise at her findings, merely a weary caution to herself to handle the child with care. She didn't need to do a more thorough physical for backup. She looked at Susan's frightened eyes and felt older by a century than this bewildered youngster.

"You doubtless suspect you're pregnant. You are. No, don't cry yet. In about two days you're going to have an unusually heavy menstrual flow and will lose the baby. It will still be so tiny you won't even recognize it for an embryo, nor will your mother ever know what happened. She might be suspicious, but there's no way for her to be sure. Now you can cry if you want to."

She handed the girl a handkerchief and sat there until Susan left off hiccupping and swallowed the last of her sobs.

"I don't know how you can be sure. I wasn't."

Vivie fixed her with a cold stare. "Don't lie to me, Susan, or I won't help you."

Susan raised frightened, big eyes. "I'm not exactly lying," she mumbled. "I really wasn't sure."

Vivie relented and smiled a little. "Probably not. Now, does the father also 'suspect'?"

"Yes and he's as scared as I am. We don't see each other often, you know. We both sing in the church choir and it's only at practice I see him."

"And how did you manage to get pregnant if choir practice is the only time you meet?"

Susan's face, already blotchy from her weeping, grew even redder.

"Sometimes he'd walk me home and I'd ask him in if my mother was meeting with her sewing group."

Of all risky rendezvous, this tale took the prize. She shuddered to think of the scene if Mrs. Chapman had come home and discovered them. These two foolish children must have experienced awfully quick encounters! She swallowed her smile at the thought. It couldn't have been much fun, the way they must have rushed. But Susan discovered one secret her termagant of a mother couldn't share. Unless the boy was

exceptionally good in bed, Susan received little satisfaction. In fact they probably didn't even have time to find a bed.

What a fiasco. And what should Vivie do now?

She looked at the red-eyed girl in front of her. Susan was a child really and one with no direction or aim in life.

Vivie took a deep breath and allowed herself just for a moment to go into Susan's mind. The girl's thoughts were such a mish-mash Vivie at first couldn't clearly see any emotions except despair and confusion. Also one not unexpected and quite strong feeling. The girl hated her mother.

Vivie sighed. This truly was a muddle. She couldn't be at all sure what to do.

She turned to the still sniffling Susan. "I expect you want to feel in charge of your own life. Am I right?"

Susan's eyes showed a little hope that someone might possibly be understanding her.

"Have you really thought about what you'd do with a baby? A living, breathing child that you were responsible for? Do you think for a moment your mother would let you even hold it in your arms? She'd doubtless give it away to strangers. And even if your mother permitted you access to the child, how would you support it? Where would you get the money? Is your lover rich enough to support you both while he finished his schooling and prepared to raise a family?"

Susan broke into a fresh torrent of tears and Vivie felt tempted to slap the girl into reality. She'd been almost cruel and she needed to be more cruel.

"When you join with a man, Susan, you take the chance of forming a new life. Life is incredibly precious. You are about to lose a small, infinitely wonderful bit of life who's been growing in your careless body. You don't deserve a second chance, but you've got it. If you continue being promiscuous, yes, you may not like it but that's the right word when you have sexual relations without love. And just for revenge on another. In this case your mother. You don't really love this irresponsible boy. You let him take liberties you should save for someone you love."

"Are you going to tell my mother?" Susan asked.

Vivie nearly threw up her hands. How much of her small sermon penetrated this child's confused brain? Hating her life and her mother, she might be incapable of truly hearing Vivie's heartfelt words of advice.

"No, of course I won't. We'll go out and face her together. I'll tell her you are about to have a heavy menstruation and the unusual physical problems were upsetting you. If you have any future problems, Susan, any time will you promise to come talk to me?"

She took Susan's hands and held them for a moment, trying to project some of her own assurance into the mind of this confused child.

Susan's eyes were filled with relief and Vivie doubted anything else reached her at all.

Vivie sighed. Oh well, she'd been abominably careless with her own life. How could she blame this not-very-bright girl?

When she told Stephen about Susan he merely flicked his finger on her cheek.

"Vivie, my love, you take too much upon yourself, as I often tell you. Your Susan will doubtless rebel against her oppressed existence until she runs away from home. Probably with a no-good lorry driver. And that's the best of the alternatives I see for her."

Vivie laughed, not very heartily and went on about her work. Stephen was probably right. But why were so many women reduced to merely acting against circumstances forced upon them, instead of letting their own minds take charge?

She nearly dropped the pile of linens she was carrying to the supply closet. Was she as mindless in her hopeless love for Alec? True, her life counted in a way thrilling her daily, but was she shutting out the rest of life while she nursed her private sorrow? Certainly she'd not given full consideration to the love she well knew Stephen felt for her. Or the other worried members of her family.

She walked slowly on to the closet. Dear Goddess, but she'd been blind. Blind to everything except her own despair. She would have to change what she could and do so immediately.

She opened her mind and felt Kate's whoosh of relief.

"Vivie, don't ever do that to me again. No matter what. Do you hear me, twin?"

Vivie laughed and with tears in her eyes reassured her beloved sister.

"Never again, Kate. I'm dreadfully sorry. I promise you, never again. But I must say it sounds wonderful to have you scold me. You so seldom do and I know I deserve it. I'll be a better twin from now on.

"Now let me tell you what I've been doing, Kate. You won't believe some of it. Life is so amazing."

She told Kate some of her successful and novel use of her Druid powers. She made no mention of how exhausted she'd become from using those powers.

Chapter Seventeen

Vivie deliberately rejoined the world outside the clinic. Although she shied away from any social function, she lunched with Emily, she shopped with her mother, she visited her grandparents and talked candidly with them all. She admitted she wasn't completely cured of her love for Alec. Although she didn't say so, she doubted if she ever would be. She realized this was the reason for not joining Emily at dances or dinners. She hoped she was almost cured, but she didn't yet dare see Alec. She might never be ready to actually see his beloved face.

She went out with Stephen a good deal, although she couldn't bring herself to give him encouragement. They walked and walked, during long lunch hours reviving her soul, especially when they went to one of the parks. They also toured the city streets, crowded with cars now petrol was again available. A lot of the city odors bothered her sensitive nose, but the overriding smell defining London and no other city always thrilled her. A bit of fog, a bit of smoke, a pungent bit of whatever the nearest street vendor was selling. Although she'd always preferred the country she now found the busy traffic and burgeoning life of the city enticing. So many changes were taking place now the Great War was finally over and the world was coming back to life. The city fairly throbbed with vehicles, people and excitement.

She and Stephen covered miles, over streets and lanes and through various parks. Once again she found everything she saw fascinating. When thoughts of Alec intruded she found it easier to thrust them aside. She still ached for him, but not quite so harshly.

It was a warm, delightful autumn. Vivie wore only a light shawl around her shoulders and the balmy weather added to the pleasure of their rambles. At first she'd walked along swinging her arms, almost oblivious to her companion. Now she tucked her arm on Stephen's sleeve, laughing up at him. If she noticed the hope burgeoning in his light blue eyes she didn't comment.

Nor did Stephen. He knew she was healing, but he was afraid to rush his fences. Still for the first time he thought he might have a chance to win his beloved Druid.

As they walked, Stephen usually let her talk a little about the newest cases in the clinic, but after a while he turned the conversation to other things. Current events were lively and fast-moving. They agreed the prime minister, Lloyd George, who was under a good deal of criticism, was in danger of losing the peace even though he'd won the war. Certainly the working classes were even worse off than before the war and unrest ruled London and England. Both Vivie and Stephen had decided opinions on everything, with Vivie invariably taking the side of the poor.

Stephen wanted desperately to keep her walking and talking with him. He worried about both her physical and emotional health. He was careful not to leave gaps in

conversation when he might blurt out his true feelings. She'd run like a frightened rabbit if she knew how deeply he loved her.

After some thought he came up with a game he hoped might capture her interest. Both of them were keenly interested in anything pertaining to the theatre or the arts. Stephen suggested they discuss a different cultural topic each week. The subject must be connected to someone currently in the arts and it was permissible to give some advance warning. They would devote fifteen minutes of each walk to the chosen topic.

"You realize what I sacrifice for your amusement, I hope." Stephen's deep sigh sounded heartfelt, but the twinkle in his eyes gave him away. "I'll mostly try to digest opinions of others if you insist on literature, as I'm not a great reader. Oh, what I do for you," he teased.

"I think you make a less than convincing martyr, you idiotic man. But I love the idea, Stephen," Vivie said. "You can bone up all you want. This will be good for you."

He flicked her cheek with a gentle finger. "We'll see who's ahead at the end of each week. Don't disparage me. We Druids can surprise anybody."

She laughed and immediately began thinking of the first topic. She picked Anatole France almost automatically because he was currently featured in all the newspapers. He'd just celebrated his seventy-fifth birthday, with honors heaped on him by all the countries of the world.

At the end of the week she admitted Stephen more than contributed his share.

"You've impressed me, Stephen. You have a fine mind. My problem is I can't decide if I like him for his work," commented Vivie, "or because he's such a fine person. I particularly admire the way he opened his country estate to the wounded during the Great War."

They walked along a while before she continued. "He could have lived much more quietly as he grew older and concentrated on his work. He purposely did not. I find him so admirable it's hard for me to be objective."

"Agreed," said Stephen. "A wonderful man and his character shows in his writings. Now, my intellectual friend, next week is my turn and I choose Agatha Christie."

He laughed at her quizzical look.

"If you've read her I'll be delighted, but I bet you haven't read much. It did me good to read Anatole France and if you haven't learned to adore Miss Christie it's high time you read everything she'd written. She's superb. Do you know her work well? Ha!! I've caught you, haven't I?"

They covered a block before he spoke again. They often did that, talking for a while and then catching their breaths while walking before they went on with the conversation. This time Stephen stopped short to toss a ball back to a little boy who was running after it. The child flicked a salute to him before dashing away and Vivie laughed.

“You won’t laugh when you see how much she’s written, Miss Erudition. Not that I expect you to read it all. Agatha Christie writes the most entertaining and convoluted murder mysteries of today. I’ve read some of her work and definitely you need to get acquainted. You won’t be able to put her down once you open one of her books.”

Vivie looked at him with a startled look. “Murder mysteries? Really! I’ll bone up a little before next week. Are you trying to tell me I’m too serious, Stephen?”

“Perhaps,” Stephen said with his contagious grin. “I hope you have to read as many hours as I did. She’s a prolific writer.”

Looking at her frowning face he hurried to modify his statement.

“Vivie, if you want extra time tell me. I don’t want you staying up late just for our game. This is supposed to be relaxing, you know.”

Vivie slowed down while she thought it over and Stephen slowed with her.

“I will need extra time on this one. But you’ve given me a delightful challenge. I love learning anything new.”

“Take your time, love. As much as you want.”

They walked on. Stephen was content with his scheme. He was attending to her recreation, as he knew she seldom went out for dinner or the theatre. He suspected she feared seeing Alec. Their weekly topics hopefully meant she spent some time on the weekend reading. Instead of agonizing over Dr. Alecander Stratton. He knew she read only the front pages of the *Times* to avoid seeing his name. Stratton was quite often in the gossip columns, along with his vivacious fiancée, Lady Priscilla and the parties they’d attended.

Some days they came back to a crisis none of the newly hired assistants felt they could handle, but still Stephen insisted on their walks. His threat to quit the clinic if she stopped, even though she knew he didn’t mean it, kept Vivie humoring him. Beside, she’d grown to love their noon-time interlude.

Stephen walked along looking at her one day, admiring her beauty and trying to mask his deep feeling. A brisk wind whisked some color into her too-pale cheeks and she looked and sounded happy. She’d just been confessing how much she come to adore Agatha Christie’s books. As they opened the door, Vivie laughed at Stephen’s nonsensical gloating over her capitulation. The minute they were inside the clinic she stiffened.

“Someone is seriously disturbed in his mind, Stephen.”

Even as she spoke the younger of the assistant nurses came rushing to them.

“Oh, I’m so glad you’re both back. We’ve got a man in the examining room who’s suicidal. Do come!”

Their prospective patient was a returned soldier, a Sgt. Ellis. He sat in a chair, not moving, not speaking, not answering even to a simple “hello”. His pretty young wife sat beside him, tears running silently down her cheeks.

"I doubt he'll talk to you," she whispered. "He hasn't spoken to me for two days. I'm surprised he came here with me, although I'm not sure he knows where we are."

Vivie sat down beside him and took his limp hand. As soon as she did so she turned white and clutched her stomach with her other hand.

"He's in the most pain I've ever felt in another human," she said softly.

Stephen immediately took her fingers away and wrapped his own big hand around the man's lower arm. The touch jolted his Druid sensitivities, even though he was untrained.

"Do you know why he's in such pain?" he asked the wife.

"He's been getting worse and worse since he came home from the war over a year ago. At first he was just quiet and didn't seem to want to go to his job, although he went for a while. He's a good mechanic and can get as much work as he wants repairing these new fancy motorcars."

A hint of pride crept into her voice, but she lowered her eyes, swallowed and went on. "Now he just sits and does nothing. Some days I can't get him to eat."

"And the nightmares?" Vivie could feel the force of some of them, even though Stephen directed her to a seat across the room.

"They're pretty terrible, miss. Really horrible. He shakes for hours afterward. How did you know?"

Vivie shook her head. "We're talking about him as if he isn't even here. I don't think that's right."

Vivie thought she saw a flicker in one eye.

She turned to the ghost of a man. "Dr. Stephen and I will help you, I swear it. Will you excuse us while we go consult, sir?"

His eyes definitely moved a little, as he seemed to watch her leave the room.

Stephen immediately rounded on her. "Vivie, I forbid what's in your mind. You want to take his pain onto yourself and hope diminishing his agony brings him back to the real world. A noble objective, my dear, but one guaranteed to destroy you. You simply cannot keep absorbing others' pain and remain healthy. You cannot do this, Vivie. You must find another way."

She said nothing for a long space of minutes. "But I know I can help him."

"I don't doubt you at all. But whether your help would be lasting is another matter. Vivie, you know I love you. At the risk of having you turn against me I must tell you I'll not let you deplete your strength like this. I'll carry you out of here first. Let me try to help him. I've never done it, but let me try."

Her astonished stare made him smile. She well knew the humorous, placating Stephen. Evidently she didn't know how to deal with a deadly serious one.

She surprised him by giggling. "You look so ferocious! I don't know whether to run for safety or try to calm you down."

His reluctant grin barely illuminated his serious face.

"You're a minx, Vivie Dellafield. I'm perfectly serious for once in my carefree life. You will not go into the man's mind."

She stared at him and recognized he was indeed deadly in earnest, in a manner most unlike her happy-go-lucky friend. She decided not to argue. His conviction must be deep, indeed.

"I think I'd better go talk to my grandmother. Excuse me, Stephen. It's too noisy in here."

She walked into the next room and shut the door.

When she came out she was barely smiling. "Grandmama Viviane is always wise. She says there is very little we can do if he'd truly determined to do away with himself. She made a suggestion though I'd like to try. There's only a small chance it will work, but let's see."

"Are you going to tell me what you plan?"

"No, I don't think so. You'll think it bizarre. Just give me your honest reaction as we go along. That will work best."

They entered the examining room to find nothing changed. Mrs. Ellis cried without a sound, tears dripping down her cheeks.

Vivie went directly to her and stood in front of her.

"We've consulted and there's nothing we can do for your husband, madam."

The poor woman looked up in distress and Vivie turned to the sergeant.

"Sgt. Ellis, I imagine you realize full well if anyone truly wants to commit suicide, it's almost impossible to stop them. I have one request though. Please don't use the gun you brought home from the war. I'd hate for your poor wife to have to clean up all your blood and messy parts."

Ellis' eyes widened and he turned just a little to give a very quick glance at his wife, who gasped audibly.

"How can you be so cruel?" she whispered, staring at Vivie.

"Cruel? What a funny word to apply to me. Don't you think your husband is being impossibly cruel to you?"

Vivie exulted at getting just the response she wanted from the pair, although Stephen was looking at her as if she'd lost her mind. She turned to signal to him to let her be, when she heard the rusty voice of the sergeant.

"You're a bitch." His glare was the most response they'd seen and Vivie exulted in her heart.

She turned her back to him and winked at Stephen. "At least I'm not the son-of-a-bitch you are."

This time she heard two gasps, although Stephen smiled.

She stopped just as she reached the door and paused with her hand on the handle.

"I just remembered we've got a man coming in tomorrow I'm really worried about. He's lost a leg and we're trying to get his prosthesis to fit so it doesn't cause him such terrible pain. I'd ask you to talk to him about his depression, but you'd probably make him worse. Although he's a brave man. He's got courage enough to try to fight for the sake of his family."

"You really are a proper bitch," the sergeant said.

"Oh, I agree. Come on, Dr. Lovernios, let's go help someone it's possible to help."

Vivie swept out of the room, with Stephen following and trying to keep from smiling.

"Do you think he'll be back tomorrow?"

"I fervently hope so. He's been shaken out of his apathy, at least. His terrible pain was lessened, too. Mama Viviane said it's all we could hope to do, right now. If he comes back to help another person we've got a really good chance of eventually helping him."

"Why do you call her 'Mama Viviane'? Isn't she your grandmother?"

"Yes, of course, but she's only seventeen years older than my mother and 'grandmother' just doesn't fit. You should see her. She's a true beauty."

"As are you, Nurse Vivie. Inside and out."

He took her hand and caressed her palm with his thumb for a long moment. She didn't take her hand away, but he could feel her tense. So that damned Stratton still held her heart. His peaceful Druid soul was getting ever more vicious thoughts about his detestable rival.

He'd like to seize Dr. Stratton by the neck and shake him until his back teeth loosened. Just the least of the violence he wished he had license to inflict. He surprised himself, he'd never known he possessed such brutish tendencies. They were not at all the normal reactions of a Druid bard.

But the special qualities of Vivie would draw forth unusual reactions from a boulder.

Chapter Eighteen

Alec peered at his image in the mirror as he shaved his heavy beard. He could find no obvious reason for the turmoil simmering inside his stomach. He was due to pick up Cissie in about twenty minutes and he'd just about be in time. He was finding it more and more difficult to meet the demands of both his professional and his social life. Cissie did not even try to understand when he was late because of a critically ill patient.

"But sweetie," she'd said. "You don't need your stupid job at the hospital. You should let me advance the money to open an office of your own. I know you say you have enough, but you'll need a really fancy one. Harley Street offices are luxurious, at least the kind I want for you."

She put her hands on his lapels and tried to snuggle up to him. He couldn't control his rigidity.

"My, we aren't feeling very romantic, are we? Oh well." She moved away with a little huff. "Still you know all my friends would be delighted to come to you and you could more or less set your own hours. Certainly you wouldn't need to be caught staying overtime, of all stupid things."

As he'd done more and more of late, Alec shut her words out of her mind and concentrated on getting himself to her flat as expeditiously as he could.

He really tried to make the evening go smoothly. They dined at the newest and smartest restaurant, where he endured all her friends coming up to bore him with their incessant chatter. One of her currently very best friends came over to meet him and frankly look him over. Not unexpectedly, this best friend sat down with him in the booth and walked her fingers up his thigh. Her friends seemed versed in subtle ways to indicate they'd be available when he tired of Cissie.

He was so very disgusted with them all, although he tried to smile at appropriate times. He managed well until he took Cissie back to her flat. Although he'd kissed and caressed her many times, something always kept him from going further. Why he didn't know. She was an attractive woman and he'd been celibate for far too long.

Tonight Cissie evidently decided the tempo should change.

She plopped herself on his lap and began to run her fingers through his hair, kissing him in a much more insistent way than usual, thrusting her tongue in his mouth while she wiggled against him.

"Come on, lover, loosen up. I'm tired of this rather tepid romance we have going. I want to go to bed with you, Alec. Now. Tonight."

He couldn't think of a thing to say. He knew Cissie and her crowd were rather fast, but their games didn't matter. What did matter was he didn't want to go to bed with Cissie. Not now. Not tonight.

She unbuttoned the front of his trousers and found his limp member, which she began to caress with knowledgeable fingers.

"Alec, cooperate here, lover. We're engaged to be married, remember? You can't possibly be shocked, can you?"

He tried to will himself to respond. He couldn't. Not in the slightest. At that moment he knew without a doubt he would never marry her. It was fast becoming not only repugnant, but an impossibility.

"Cissie, I'm sorry. I've really had a very hard day."

She flounced off his lap. "Well, that's the only thing hard around here. Are you sure you can get it up at all? I haven't seen much evidence. I've seldom been so insulted. I think you're perfectly beastly."

He fought down the urge to ask her how many times she'd seduced a man by opening his trousers and attacking him. He didn't really want to know.

He left and went to his club. He ordered a brandy, although he didn't touch it. He sat silently, by himself, searching his soul.

The fact Cissie's father sponsored him for membership in Brooks didn't help his appraisal of his present misery. He should be the most delighted man in London. He'd achieved everything he'd fought for since those not very long ago days in Boston. Harley Street and wealthy patients waited just around the corner, whenever he wanted to claim them. Why then did he feel such despondency?

His heart knew the answer, one he couldn't bring himself to acknowledge. He didn't want to be physician to bored women like Cissie's friends. He'd probably be lucky if one of them didn't drag down his pants in the middle of his examining her.

That was part of it. But the real reason, the overriding reason, was Vivie. Vivie who haunted him night and day. Her piquant face floated in front of him constantly, whether his eyes were open or shut. He fought going to bed at night, knowing as soon as he tried to sleep she would be there in his mind. Her stunning emerald eyes smiling at him.

His beautiful Druid. Except she wasn't his. She could have been, had he not been so damned stupid. If he'd only found the sense to propose to her before he discovered her ancestry they could have weathered all the attendant storms. Being revealed as the granddaughter of the Duke and Duchess of Lambden would have shocked him, but he hoped he wouldn't have been too openly crass and pleased. Although then he might very well have been.

His character was not admirable.

Amazing how he'd reversed his mind about her lineage. He found it hard to believe he now regretted her noble birth. If he had his choice, he'd rather she were just Vivie

Field. They would be a little more equal. How could he have undergone such a complete reversal? It really made little sense, but his changed feelings were as real as his awakened heart.

If she hadn't so shocked him would he have lost his temper and his mind and gotten engaged to Cissie? No use trying to put any of the blame on Vivie. The blame fell entirely on his own disgusting lack of character. He cringed whenever he remembered their first dinner date when he stated blandly he intended to marry for money and position.

How could he have been so asinine? The answer was clear and asinine was the kindest of the many words applicable to his lack of moral fiber. If ever a man hated himself with good reason, he was that singularly stupid man.

He left his brandy on the table and called for his coat. He'd no idea how he was going to get out of his engagement to Cissie, but get out of it he must. A definite premonition told him this might be the last time he'd be in Brooks. He didn't give it another thought. Entry to the exclusive club was no longer important.

* * * * *

The next day, he found one of his problems not nearly as serious as he thought. Cissie wrote him a note breaking their engagement and had it delivered to the hospital. She did not enclose their engagement ring, nor mention it. He smiled for the first time in a long while. She was welcome to it. At last he felt free to try to persuade Vivie he'd changed from the complete and asinine scoundrel she knew.

How to convince her was another matter. Just because he'd finally become wretched enough to see with frightening clarity he'd chosen the wrong track in life didn't mean much. Vivie's honor was formidable and she'd not accept a tepid statement of regret. He would have to prove his change of heart and he hadn't the slightest idea of how to go about it.

He could never prove himself good enough for her, because he wasn't. His main hope, the one prompting him to pursue his dream, was Vivie herself. Perhaps her generous heart would prompt her to give him a chance and listen to him.

Would it do any good to tell her of his appalling struggle to become a doctor? He'd have to give the idea very serious thought. He feared she'd be completely disgusted. But then, with her heart encompassing the world's troubles, she might not. It could help her understand him much better. Admittedly he knew much more about her than she did about him. Perhaps it was only fair to tell her a little of his earlier, almost overwhelming trials.

Another sign of how much he'd changed. With amazement he realized he now wanted to tell her.

For the first time he was anxious to reveal his past instead of hiding it. He not only owed it to Vivie, it would be a relief. If she gave him the chance to tell her anything.

Now, how could he find the best way to force her to speak to him? Going to the clinic was too public for the fervent confession he wanted to make. Perhaps Emily? Would Emily help him set up a meeting with Vivie? It seemed the best idea so far. He'd best not phone her, he'd better drop around and try to catch her at home.

He did catch Emily at home and she shut the door in his face.

"Emily, please talk to me. Give me a chance, please."

He shouted through the closed door and then waited. If he couldn't even reach Emily, what chance did he have with Vivie?

He waited, pounded again and waited.

"I'm still here, Emily. I'm not likely to go away."

Emily opened her door, her cold face showing her pitiless disdain.

"I can't imagine what you have to say to me, Stratton. How's your lovely fiancée?"

The scorn in her voice wasn't unexpected, but it still hurt.

"I don't know," he answered. "We're no longer engaged."

One of his eyelids twitched and he felt it and knew it betrayed his distress. And no longer cared even for that.

"Oh, my God," Emily said. "And so you want to run back to Vivie. How insulting. I think not, my ex-friend."

Alec's temper started to rise. He should have expected such treatment from one as loyal to Vivie as Emily, but that didn't stop him from being annoyed.

"I no longer want any of life's trappings I thought I did. I'd like a chance to explain to Vivie. I don't really intend to go into my change of heart with you."

She sniffed. "I probably wouldn't believe you anyway. She's finally adjusted to life without you and is busy and surrounded by people who love her. I don't intend to even tell her you were here. Goodnight, Doctor."

The door was shut once again in his face. Maybe not so loudly, but still closed tight. Did "people who loved her" include Lovernios? Most probably. Alec couldn't imagine any male being around Vivie and not falling in love with her.

He decided to walk back to his flat. Maybe on the way his brain would clear. Right now he could think of nothing else but to present himself at the clinic and hope for the best.

On the long walk home he pondered how perhaps he'd best try to catch her late in the afternoon, when most of her patients were taken care of and she was more relaxed. He knew well how conscientious she was and he'd have no chance early in the morning when the work load was the heaviest. He didn't want her to have too many excuses as to why she couldn't talk to him. Going later in the day also meant he could wait her out 'til she left to go home. Also less time needed for finding someone to fill in for him at the hospital.

The next few days found him thoroughly frustrated. Every time he started to leave the hospital a crisis arose and he was forced to stay on. Once a young boy was hit by a car and he performed a long, exhausting surgery to save his right leg. Vivie would have understood and approved. Cissie would have thrown a temper tantrum. How could he have been so blind, for so long?

He could find no excuse at all.

Almost a week passed before finding a replacement plus a lighter schedule allowed him to get away halfway through the afternoon. With a feeling of utter determination, he left to go find Miss Vivie Dellafield. At least he'd now progressed enough to think of her by her proper name without flushing with anger.

He hurried into a taxi and presented himself at the clinic. He asked to see Vivian and instead Dr. Stephen Lovernios came out to the waiting room.

A coldly reserved Dr. Lovernios who made no pretense at pleasantries.

"May I ask why you want to see Miss Dellafield, Doctor?"

Alec looked into the face of an enemy. They'd once been friends and his aloofness chilled Alec's bones.

"Hullo, Stephen, it's nice to see you too."

Alec rose to his feet but didn't extend his hand. There was no doubt Lovernios would refuse to shake it. Alec decided he'd be formal too.

"Yes, you can ask, but no, I won't tell you, Doctor. My business with Vivie is private."

Stephen didn't relent. "You won't see her, Stratton. You've caused her enough pain. But let me tell you about some of what she'd been doing here at the clinic. You probably won't believe me, but you're going to hear it. Perhaps the good she does will wake you up to her unusual character. And give you some thoughts about your own."

Actually Alec was delighted to hear anything about Vivie, so he merely nodded.

Lovernios remained standing, his hands tightly gripped.

"She did something I've never even heard of. There was a little girl so weak I didn't dare anesthetize her, but her bad tonsils so drained her health she wouldn't have lasted a year. Vivie entered her mind and took her on an imaginary journey while I cut out the diseased tonsils. It was the most incredibly selfless act I've ever seen. Vivie was exhausted for days. Doing such a spiritual feat is personally draining, as any Druid knows. That act was the most impressive, but there are plenty of others."

"I'd appreciate if you'd tell me about all of them," Alec said. If he feared Lovernios was emphasizing just a little his advantages over Alec, he said nothing.

What Stephen just described could not be explained. His mind put it together with the actions he'd discounted, the napkin he couldn't dislodge from his lap, the rat she'd talked into leaving the clinic. Then there was her claim she'd forced Wheeler to drop the gun. Perhaps he'd been spectacularly wrong. Technically and scientifically correct, but wrong. So very wrong.

Stephen was talking again, his face contemptuous of Alec but his voice showing his awe as he talked of Vivie's feats.

"There are too many selfless deeds to list them all. The small boy with the broken leg whose pain she assumed into herself 'til we could get him on medication. The suicidal war veteran whose mind she entered enough to understand his pain and know how to treat him. He's now helping us in the clinic with other difficult cases.

"There are many, many other examples involving her assumption of another's pain. Unfortunately such selflessness is weakening. That you can't believe in her talents is your misfortune. What concerns me is these efforts take a deep toll of her strength and I'll not have you distressing her further. She is already too frail."

Alec stood silently for a long moment. This was an obstacle he'd not expected. Above all, he was truly alarmed. If true and he was beginning to realize it as truth, such constant psychic exertions would definitely be weakening her.

Quite evidently everyone who knew Vivie was trying to protect her. Now that he understood what she'd been doing, he longed to join in the effort to protect her. He didn't blame anyone in the slightest for trying to keep him away. Not even that damned good-looking Lovernios.

But those protective others were scuttling not only his one chance of happiness, but taking away her right to decide for herself. He thought of stalking through the clinic 'til he found her. His childhood in Boston taught him a few tricks about fighting that would level the handicap of Lovernios' extra inches.

Just thinking of the weeks Lovernios had spent with her made him long to rearrange the features on his handsome face. He doubted a brawl would endear him to Vivie, so his idea wasn't a real winner. Not right now, anyway. But he'd keep it in reserve.

Which left him with what? Waiting outside the clinic or waiting at Emily's. Emily wouldn't let him and anyway he was here.

"I intend to see her. I'll stay right here," he told Stephen, who scowled, wheeled and strode away.

Alec didn't bother speaking with anyone as he settled himself in the waiting room, watching the door. Perhaps Vivie would come to call for one of the patients. Or he could simply wait 'til the clinic closed for the day. One way or another, he would see her soon.

He must. No one would stop him now.

No one, but no one, would keep him from his Druid.

He almost hoped someone would try.

Chapter Nineteen

Vivie felt tired most of the time. It rather worried her, although she didn't intend to admit such a weakness to anyone. Kate was starting to fret also, so Vivie was faced with trying to cover up or talk it over with her twin. She'd promised Kate she wouldn't shut her out again, so she had little choice. Actually, she was rather glad. Everything took so much effort and she liked not having to expend any energy needlessly. It took decided power, power she wondered if she now even possessed, to close her mind to her twin.

She probed and found Kate waiting.

"I don't understand it, Kate. Stephen is being dictatorial, insisting I leave the clinic at a halfway decent hour. Yet there is often a need for me to stay later. One night he actually picked me up, carried me out to a cab and told the driver to take me home."

"Good for him, Vivie."

"But it's so, so Gothic!"

"Not really," Kate responded. "Sounds sensible to me."

Vivie gave a laugh which turned into a choking cough and Kate picked up on it right away. "Twin, you're not feeling well, are you? Is it just fatigue? No, it's something else. What is it, Vivie, or do I have to mind probe?"

This time the laugh was more genuine.

"Oh, all right. I've got a sore throat, an unusually wicked one. And I think a little fever. There was a sick little boy in here last week with the same complaints. I couldn't see anything else wrong with him so we sent him home. I sent some lemon balm with his mother to relieve the fever. That's gentle enough for a child."

"You've gone so far beyond me in your knowledge of medicine, Vivie." Kate sounded a little wistful and Vivie snorted.

"Not nearly as far ahead as your knowledge of the violin leaves me."

After Kate chuckled Vivie mentally said goodbye, put her head on her folded arms on her desk and was immediately asleep.

It was here that Stephen found her. He'd been debating whether to tell her Alec Stratton had been sitting in the waiting room for three hours and showed no signs of going away. Surely it was better to let her sleep. Let Stratton sit there. Stephen didn't care to disturb Vivie, not when he knew how badly she needed her rest. He silently turned and left.

Alec waited. Not patiently, but he waited. He wasn't comfortable, but he almost welcomed his discomfort. He certainly deserved any misery fate decided to hand to him. As far as he was concerned, he didn't have the right to complain about anything.

When he looked around him and saw the good Vivie and Stephen were accomplishing, it further sickened him to think of his recent foray into society and his artificial plans.

He began to wonder as time dragged on and he saw the clinic staff obviously closing down their duties and leaving. The curious glances they sent him didn't bother him. The fact there'd been no sign of Vivie did. Nor could Stephen have left. He remembered Vivie's sketch of the building clearly and the only rear doors led to a service alley.

As he thought about it, he began to be angry. No way in hell could Stephen keep Vivie from him. He doubted Vivie even knew he was here. She was too forthright to hide from him if Stephen had told her he sat waiting for her. If she truly didn't want to see him she'd come out and tell him so.

Perhaps it was time to scour the clinic and find her.

Seeing no one else left in the waiting room, or even in the halls, he wandered at will through the clinic. He quickly recognized Vivie had faithfully followed the plans they once laid out together. With a very few additions, she'd built the clinic he once planned with her.

He saw a door marked dispensary and tried the handle. With a smile he noted the door was locked. Good for you, Vivie. He walked past the ward, but did not go in. Next came the office with the name, Dr. Lovernios on it, although the door was open and the room was empty. Across the hall was Vivie's office, with again an open door.

He went to the door and found Lovernios on his knees by Vivie, begging her to answer him. Vivie slumped over the desk, her face turned away from him. Auburn hair spilled over her arms and onto the desk, creating a deep red flare against the dark wood.

Stephen looked up at Alec, his expression anguished.

"She's unconscious, Stratton. She won't answer me and she's burning with fever. Really burning."

Chapter Twenty

Alec swiftly moved to Vivie's other side. He placed one hand gently on her forehead and found the heat he'd expected, although the intensity shocked him. This was not a casual fever.

"Let's get her to a bed in the ward. I noticed no one else there right now. I imagine you use it only for occasional patients in need of a few nights' care. Right?"

"Yes. A good idea. I'll carry her."

"No, let me, please," Alec's tone was impersonal, although he felt anything but aloof. His mind frantically scanned the various reasons for such a high temperature. None of which he liked in the slightest. "You get whatever you need to bring a fever down. I don't know which herbs she'd prefer. You do."

"She'd want Druid medicine, of course. She keeps the dispensary well stocked with herbal remedies she brews herself. I'll get some lemon balm, although it might be too mild. No, I'll bring some yarrow. Yarrow. Yes, that should work faster."

Stephen lifted Vivie carefully and placed her in Alec's arms. Then he almost ran to get the yarrow. Alec slowly walked to the ward, holding his precious armful with cautious tenderness. He bent his head just once to kiss her forehead, but realizing he'd been forced to slow to do so kept him from slackening his pace again. Stephen's not insisting on carrying her himself surprised Alec even though it enabled him to get the medicine as quickly as possible. Stephen was a generous man.

Alec lay Vivie down, bending at the knees and depositing her gently on the bed. He didn't like what he was seeing and feeling. Her body radiated heat like a small furnace. With a wry grin he remembered the first time he'd spoken to her, when she slumped against the wall after cooling a fevered child with ice. Doubtless a good idea until whatever medicine Stephen brought had a chance to work. As soon as he could he'd get ice. Right now he didn't want to leave her unattended for a moment.

Stephen soon appeared with a bottle, a cup and a spoon in his hands. Alec had drawn a light blanket partly over Vivie and Stephen looked at her uncertainly.

"We'll have a hell of a time getting this medicine down her," he groaned.

"You must have an icebox in the dispensary to keep medicine cool. If you tell me where an ice pick is I'll get some."

"No, let me," said Stephen. "I know where everything is."

He sped off again, his long legs almost running. In a short time he reappeared, holding a basin of ice chips and plenty of cloths. He immediately put some ice in a towel and draped it on her forehead.

Alec in the meantime started cooling one of her arms and Stephen began on the other.

Alec kept up the sponging. "I'd like to do her whole body, but I know she'd resent that later. Let's just do her face and arms for a short while. The fever is worrisome, but it can't have too long a start. I'm sure you talked to her a short while ago."

Stephen grimaced. "I did. I thought she sounded a little vague, but I put that down to exhaustion. She's complained about fatigue several times this week. Not like her, not like her at all."

Alec didn't know if he meant she wasn't usually tired or didn't ordinarily complain. Doubtless both.

They worked in silence for a while. After about five minutes Alec reluctantly considered undressing her. He was ashamed of himself, it only showed he was still a regrettable bastard. But he couldn't suppress the thought he didn't want any other man seeing what he was sure was a beautiful body. The other man might be a doctor, but the other man loved her.

Just then Vivie's eyelids slowly opened, her face on the pillow turned to Alec's side of the bed.

"Alec," she said. Her voice was very low and overflowing with love.

Alec's rigid face melted and tears filled his eyes. Her soft tone was a complete and unmistakable revelation of her deep feeling for him.

Stephen bowed his head. That he'd understood as Alec did was unmistakable. Alec, even as he gloried in the possibility he might somehow win her again, felt only the deepest pity for his rival. Yet Stephen was more handsome, more charming, more charismatic. Some girl, someday, would love him as he deserved. He wanted to tell Stephen there would surely be someone else for him, but he, Alec, would never find another to love. He'd come to many conclusions in the long and painful searching of his soul. He knew Vivie to be his only chance for happiness. He swallowed his words and said not a single one.

Stephen recovered first and putting his arms behind Vivie's shoulders lifted her slightly.

"Alec is indeed here and is about to give you some sips of yarrow tea. You brewed it yourself, love, you certainly can't refuse it."

Stephen nodded his head to the cup on the bedside table and Alec immediately held it to her lips. Vivie looked at Alec, then at Stephen with a sweet smile. She seemed fully awake and with them once again.

"Do I have a fever then? Yes, of course I do. Hullo, Alec."

She opened her mouth and obediently swallowed the tea.

"Um. I don't want much, but it does smell nice." She lay back on her pillows, her fevered body shuddering slightly.

"Do you hurt anyplace, Vivie? Beside your head, of course." Stephen tried to sound unconcerned.

"Oh yes, I've got the most wicked sore throat I've ever known. I told Kate just before I went to sleep. How did I get here on the bed?"

Alec answered in his normal tone of voice, which he hoped didn't sound as sentimental as he felt.

"I carried you, Vivie. Let me tell you you're no lightweight, either. Maybe we'd better put you on a diet."

Alec, joking? No longer angry? She knew well she was thinner than when he'd last seen her. She'd lost almost half a stone in the last few weeks. Still she appreciated his light tone. She couldn't cope with anything else right now. If she weren't so blasted tired she'd ask him why he'd come. Right now it didn't seem important. She only knew she was glad to see him. She smiled at him, but with only a shadow of her usual glorious exuberance.

Stephen gently laid her against her pillows again.

"Before you doze off again, my Sleeping Beauty, who have you taken care of lately that you might have exposed you to such a sore throat?"

She smiled at his favorite designation when talking to female patients in the infirmary. Woman or child, they always adored having Stephen as their doctor.

"Oh, let's see. The little Allenson boy came in with tonsillitis, but that doesn't count. Oh yes, the parents of the Boynton boy phoned me today to tell me they're taking him to London Hospital. They fear he has poliomyelitis, but I couldn't have caught that. I didn't do anything but check his tonsils. I forgot to tell Kate about how badly the poor child felt."

She closed her eyes, their beautiful emerald color clouded by the unnatural fever.

"Ooh, my throat really, really hurts."

She suddenly left them. She fell into a sleep bordering on unconsciousness in just seconds.

Stephen and Alec stared at each other across the bed. Of all the possible causes for her symptoms, this was one of the worst. Stephen hadn't known of the Boyntons' call, so he was not even considering anything so desperate.

He frowned and then dropped a light kiss on Vivie's hair.

"Blessed be, little Druid."

He turned and walked out of the ward.

Alec stood there for a moment longer. He yearned to throw himself on his knees beside her bed and beg her Goddess to let him take her disease into himself, no matter what she'd contracted. He'd give up any thought of his future if he could spare her from polio.

He deserved it.

She did not.

He stared at her. Her beloved features were beautiful, even flushed with fever. Her gorgeous hair was fanned across her pillow, its deep color glowing against the white, white case.

He too, murmured a Druid's blessing.

"Blessed be, my dearest love."

He thought she might have smiled for an instant, but he couldn't be sure. His face turned grim as he stalked from the room. Polio could be a deadly crippler, as everyone in the world knew. The worldwide epidemic of 1916 terrified everyone. Thousands and thousands were stricken, most of them living in the United States. Yet everyone in the world dreaded this terrible crippler let loose to wreck bodies and lives.

Vivie had weakened herself caring for others, caring for them to a degree dangerous to herself. She would need all her strength if she were indeed a victim of polio.

Where would she find the power to beat back this killer?

May her Goddess protect his beloved Druid.

His head bowed, he went to find Stephen.

Chapter Twenty-One

Alec found Stephen sitting at his desk in his office, a bleak expression on his handsome face. He was twirling a pencil absently between two of his long surgeon's fingers. His head was bent as if concentrating on the twisting of the innocuous pencil. He did not even glance up as Alec entered.

Alec pulled a chair up close to the desk so Stephen would be forced to face him when he finally acknowledged his presence. Alec said nothing at all.

After a long moment, Stephen spoke.

"I'm not stupid. I heard her voice when she spoke your name. You're a damned bastard and you don't deserve her."

Alec spread his hands flat on the desk. Although neither one noticed, their hands were remarkably alike. Tapered fingers, just a little longer than most, with a look of strength about them. Surgeon's hands.

"I agree with you completely. I don't deserve to have her even speak to me. However I hope to someday soon tell her my side of the story and pray to her Goddess Vivie forgives me."

Stephen's looked at him fully. "I can't even wish you luck. I imagine you'll have it though and when she's well you'll be the one she wants. At least just now you sounded as if you're accepting her tremendous abilities a little."

Alec took a deep breath. They must work together and although he thought Stephen's hostility slightly lessened, he could still sense his repugnance. Still the only important thing was Vivie. Although every fiber of Alec's being called to him to stay with his beloved Druid, he knew he could not insist on this. He'd thrown away the right to enter any part of her life.

"I've been incredibly stupid and know I have a lot to learn. Her abilities are something I can't yet quite comprehend. Vivie's the important one now. She should not be left alone tonight. I think you have priority in taking care of her."

He turned to go when Stephen spoke to him.

"I'm a Druid, too, Stratton. I think all Druids possess a sensitivity I wish right now I didn't have. I know in my heart she'll want you. If you want to spend the night at her bedside, I'll allow you the privilege. God knows I hate almost everything about you, but I think she'd be happier if she awoke to see you at her side. At this point her health is all that matters. I have a very bad feeling about her collapse."

The eyes Stephen raised were those of a tortured man.

Alec did not answer at first. Stephen's selfless attitude put him so to shame he couldn't speak for a moment. No matter how difficult for him to endure, still Stephen deserved priority in any decisions about Vivie.

He finally spoke, although the words wrenched his very soul.

"I'd do anything for her health, Stephen. But you've earned the right to be with her. I have not."

Stephen pushed himself to his feet as Alec turned away.

"No, wait, Stratton. If she awakens she'll still be feverish and so her emotional defenses will be down. She'll respond better to suggestions from you right now. I'll leave you the key to the dispensary. She needs to swallow the yarrow tea every few hours, at least. I'll get as much sleep as I can so I can take over in the morning. The night is always the worst."

Stephen turned away and started gathering up a few papers to take with him.

"Although I hope when she regains her health and her usual wisdom she rejects you out of hand. You're still a double-dyed bastard in my book. If you weren't such a competent bastard I'd not leave her for a minute."

He reached for his coat and started toward the door.

"Oh and here is my phone number. I trust you to call me if there is any change for the worse. Don't worry about disturbing me. I doubt I'll get much rest this night."

His powerful shoulders strained as he shrugged into his coat.

Alec watched him as he walked out. Stephen Lovernios was a damned impressive man. Stephen took a little detour to look in on Vivie one last time and then left. Walking slowly, but he left.

Alec sped back to his Druid.

Everything that happened only showed what a superior person Stephen was. Thank the Gods, or in this case, Vivie's Goddess, fate did not always favor the deserving. Although if he had the chance he would strive to be as selfless and worthy as his rival.

If he tried his damndest he might come close.

He'd recognized he loved Vivie before he came to the clinic, but seeing her unconscious and so ill made him realize with a kind of desperation how deep his love had become. He'd do anything in his power to help her. Eventually he might earn the right to try to secure her. A thought he must put away for now.

The night dragged on, with Vivie's fever rising and then abating when Alec sponged her with icy water. At one point he opened her blouse enough to cool the upper part of her chest. She wore a lacy slip lightly covering her beautifully firm breasts. Just that small tantalizing glimpse provoked a swift reaction from his traitorous body. Two quick thoughts flashed through his mind. One, thank God Stephen wasn't around and the other brought a brief grin. Cissie should see him now! A third quickly followed. He was a wretch to think of anything but Vivie's health.

He set to work cooling her as much as he could with discretion.

From time to time she murmured. Mostly names, his and Kate's. Once she said, 'Mama'. He wakened her three times to give her another draught of medicine. She didn't seem to know him, although she swallowed it and quickly went back to her muttering sleep.

As morning neared, the fever broke for a spell. When she woke this time she looked at him, then her eyes turned bleak before she shut them as if to block out the sight.

His heart contracted at her involuntary rejection.

"Vivie, please don't be distressed that I'm here. For my part I thank your Goddess I am. I'll tell you soon why I came, but for now, grant me the privilege of caring for you. You're very sick, my dear."

She turned her head on her pillow and didn't speak.

He busied himself cleaning up the area around the bed where he'd thrown towels. Just as he'd found her once and reprimanded her with unforgivable gall. He straightened the bedcovers as best he could, but she still said not a word. Deeply thankful her sickness had lifted enough for that one precious moment to reveal her feeling for him was not dead, he didn't try to make her talk.

Dawn was rising on the part of the horizon he could glimpse through the windows. The crimson-streaked sky promised a warmer day than usual for this time of year. When did he last see a dawn, let alone such a gorgeous one? If he'd seen one, he'd not possessed the sense to appreciate it. He felt like an infant just discovering the world around him. My God, but he'd gone off track with his senseless ambition and Cissie's artificial world. A world that he'd once craved with no wisdom at all and entered with utter stupidity.

Beside him Vivie gasped out a warning. "Alec. I'm going to be ill."

He held the pan as she threw up again and again. He felt thankful to be here to help her. No one else would ever take care of her, if he could have his way. When she lay back against the pillows, he sponged her sweating face and dropped a kiss on her forehead.

"Alec, I don't want you seeing me like this." She turned her face from him as she colored with mortification.

He grinned. "Vivie, as long as I can see you, I don't care about anything else. You will always look wonderful to me. How are your pains?"

He took her hand and began to massage her wrist with his thumb. She doubtless didn't feel the thrill he did, but she let her hand stay in his. It was heaven to touch her without her jerking away from him.

She turned her head back and forth on her pillow. "I've certainly never had so many of them. Now they're shooting down my legs. Do something, Alec."

He hoped his despair at her words didn't show. "I'll try, love. Can't you tell me which of your herbal medicines you'd like me to bring you? More yarrow tea?"

“No, let’s try the boneset. A few drops in a glass of water,” she murmured. “I wish Kate were here. I can’t reach her in my mind right now. I don’t know why.”

He went to the dispensary and found the bottle labeled “boneset” and quickly added some drops to water. He didn’t intend to argue with her. Perhaps her medicine would help her pains. Surely worth the chance. No medicine he knew could even mitigate the dreaded onset of poliomyelitis. After she’d swallowed the water and drifted off again into a feverish sleep, he took the glass from her and sat beside her bed, his head buried in his hands.

After a few minutes he got up and went to find a phone. He must call Stephen, as he’d promised. He wasn’t happy with Vivie’s symptoms. Not at all.

Nor would they please Stephen, the worthy man who loved her almost as desperately as Alec.

Chapter Twenty-Two

The two men who loved her stood beside her bed, as she drifted further and further into the disease threatening her very life. Brilliant doctors both, they knew little to do except let the polio run its course. Only a minor percentage of cases was crippling. Perhaps Vivie would be one of the lucky ones.

She no longer seemed conscious of anything except the pain racking her body. They tried some conventional pain-killing medicines, but nothing seemed to help.

Alec rarely left her side, only stretching out on the bed nearest hers when he was too tired to stand. He'd phoned orders to the doorman at his flat to bring him his shaving kit and some changes of clothes. He'd already sent a message to the hospital requesting a leave of absence. Stephen left Vivie's bedside only enough to keep the clinic functioning. He seemed gradually convinced of Alec's devotion, but still he could not bring himself to speak with any kind of friendship.

They consulted only on medical matters and Alec and Stephen agreed they should close off the ward to any new patients. No one knew for sure how the disease was transmitted, so they were both even more careful than usual in scrubbing their hands. But Vivie had also been meticulous. Still, it couldn't hurt to take elementary precautions. Basically they felt helpless, as all their knowledge and skill proved of no benefit to the girl they loved.

On the third day Alec decided word should be sent to Vivie's family. He wrote notes to the Duke and Duchess of Lambden and to Lord and Lady Lance Dellafield. He tried not to alarm them, but wrote Vivie was suffering a good deal, although everything possible was being done.

He sealed the envelopes just as a beautiful, chestnut haired duplicate of Vivie swept into the clinic. Older than Vivie, but in her spirited way every bit as lovely. The woman he'd seen briefly at the fateful ball.

"I'm Morgan Dellafield," she announced, drawing off her gloves. "My daughter is ill and I'd like to see her, please."

Alec, seated at the secretary's desk near the entrance, jumped to his feet and rushed toward her.

"I'm Alec Stratton," he said. "But I'm just writing you now asking you to come. How on earth did you know?"

Morgan looked him over for a very long moment. Alec had no doubt she knew exactly who he was and how he'd saddened her daughter.

"Interesting," she finally said. "I came prepared to dislike you intensely, Dr. Stratton. But I perceive a true anxiety for my daughter which shakes my opinion. Suppose we start afresh. How is Vivie?"

Alec was seized with a longing to throw his arms around this stranger and lay his head on her shoulder. He shook himself slightly to bring himself back to his senses.

"Can Vivie talk to you as she does her twin?"

Alec didn't even realize he'd ignored her question until the corners of Morgan's mouth turned up a little.

"Not really. Their communication is quite exceptional. But I can sense when something's gone badly wrong, as it has now. May I please see my daughter?"

Alec smote his forehead with his hand.

"I'm sorry, I'm sorry. Of course you can. It's just I'm trying so desperately to understand everything about Vivie. Come this way, please, Lady Lance."

He realized he was babbling, but it didn't seem important.

"Vivie is indeed quite ill. Dr. Lovernios and I are both extremely concerned."

He motioned to a nurse and asked her to please tell Dr. Lovernios Lady Lance had arrived, all the time leading the way to the ward where Vivie lay.

Stephen sat at Vivie's bedside and he and Alec stood in silence as Morgan knelt by her daughter's bed. She smoothed the hair from her brow, although Vivie's tossing head soon dislodged another lock.

"I can't get into her mind. Reaching her is more important now than her privacy, but I can't find her."

Lady Lance sounded quite distraught, not at all like the perfectly controlled lady who'd appeared at the door of the clinic.

Stephen and Alec glanced at each other, both afraid this withdrawal meant Vivie was sinking deeper into a dangerously unconscious state.

In his desperation Alec could think of only one thing. Medicine couldn't help his love now.

"Is it possible to reach her twin?" he asked.

"Kate's on her way," murmured Morgan, as she smoothed Vivie's forehead.

"Oh," said Stephen. "She'd already started to come for a visit?"

Morgan looked at him, her surprise showing.

"No, Doctor Lovernios. Kate hasn't been able to reach Vivie's mind and knew it had to be a serious blocking. When Vivie shut Kate out once before Kate knew her twin wasn't letting her through. This time she recognized the emptiness as dangerous."

"I don't begin to understand the powers the women of your family have, Lady Lance. I only wish I did." Stephen obviously was abashed at being shown as somehow lacking before both Vivie's mother and his rival.

Morgan gave him a sweet smile and turned back to her daughter. "No one can force power, Doctor. Although some have unrecognized abilities. You probably have some you could work on."

She remained silent for a moment and then added, "Kate and her grandmother left Paris over a day ago. Kate should be here very soon."

Alec felt he could no longer be astonished by anything Vivie or the females in her family could do.

"Thank God," he said. "If you'll both excuse me I'll go take a little rest myself. I don't know two people I'd rather leave Vivie with."

Stephen gave him a startled and grateful look and then turned to Morgan.

"Let me get a chair for you, Lady Lance."

"I'd appreciate one." Again she flashed her lovely smile. "Although we don't have long to wait. I can feel Kate. She's very close."

Those words changed Alec's mind about resting and he spent the next ten minutes sitting by the door of the clinic in anticipation of meeting Kate. Of course he knew she was an identical twin. He remembered how once Vivie joked about the games they played as children. Evidently they could fool almost anyone when they chose to change places. They'd even tricked Lord Lance several times. Only their mother instantly knew them apart. Alec simply could not imagine another girl as lovely as Vivie.

He knew he was wrong again when the door flew open and Kate burst through into the clinic. Kate was just as lovely and indeed, at first glance, identical. It was not just the pounds Vivie had lost which had fined her face. Kate was somehow not quite so provocative, perhaps not even gifted with so strong a temper. He couldn't pin it down, but she was not the same. Gorgeous, but not Vivie.

He rose to his feet. "I'm Alec Stratton. Welcome, Miss Dellafield. You resemble Vivie strongly, but I'm surprised at how different you are. I didn't expect that. I'll take you to your sister."

Kate stopped short. "The infamous Dr. Stratton. Why are you here?"

She stared at him with the same intensity as her mother. Alec had not prepared himself, although he should have remembered Vivie told Kate everything. He reddened to the tips of his ears.

"I'm here because I love your sister." He spoke with dignity and resolution.

Kate looked at him with the identical, long piercing gaze of Vivie. "The Druid look", although he suppressed his smile at the thought of how many times Vivie had pinned him with the same dissecting stare.

She reached up and twisted a lock of her hair round one finger. "Yes," she said. "You really do. You must have come to your senses, then."

"I hope so," Alec replied, his rare grin breaking over his dark face. "I like to think so."

"Good," was Kate's only comment. "Please take me to her. She needs me."

"She does indeed. Thank God you're here."

He motioned her ahead of him and when they came to the door of the ward, stepped ahead to open it. Kate went to Vivie's bed and stood looking down at her unconscious sister.

"Oh, Vivie," she sighed. Through her tears she noticed her mother and crossing to her, hugged and was hugged in return.

"Thank God you're here, my darling girl," Morgan murmured. "Vivie is very, very ill. I hope you can help her."

"She's worse than I expected, Mama. I think we'd better wait for Mama Viviane. We're going to need all the Druid power we can muster."

Morgan's shock was evident at Kate's assessment. The words implied Kate could do little and Morgan had expected her to do much.

"I'm sure Mama Viviane's nearly here. I imagine after she left Papa Devon at their house she started immediately to the clinic."

Kate hadn't moved, which didn't seem to upset Morgan, so Alec deduced he'd been allowed to see another power of the Druid women. That they were all amazingly close was evident.

Stephen reacted with astonishment to the sight of Kate.

"If Vivie were well I'd never have known you apart," he said, shaking his head. "I've never seen such a resemblance."

Kate looked at him sharply and smiled, then turned to Alec. "Maybe you're not as bad as I thought," she said. Alec nodded with a brief smile of his own, although he had no idea what she meant.

The two doctors were standing at the foot of Vivie's bed, with her mother on one side and Kate on the other. There was a long silence while Morgan looked anxiously at Kate, who was concentrating on Vivie.

Finally Kate looked up, despair etched on her beautiful face.

"I can't reach her. I haven't been able to since she became so ill. She's not willing it. She's gone someplace beyond me and it frightens me to death."

Morgan blanched. "I'm just as frightened, Kate."

Suddenly Vivie spoke sensibly for the first time that day, although her words were worried and mumbled.

"My legs and back hurt so much, Kate. Do something."

So at least the fact of her twin's presence penetrated the cloudy world Vivie now inhabited.

"I will dear one. Don't fret."

Kate's eyes were swimming with tears, as were those of the anxious people gathered round Vivie's bed. Hardened physicians though Stratton and Lovernios were,

quite accustomed to deathbed scenes and relatives' agonizing wails, this was vastly different. This was Vivie.

"I can try to help, but I'd rather wait for Mama Viviane. She'll be here very soon. Then we'll consult on what's best to do."

Just then Vivie turned on her side and drew her knees up very slightly.

"Something's changed, Kate. The worst of the pain's left my legs. There's still some pain, but what's there is surrounded by a kind of nothing. I'm so frightened, Kate."

Kate's lovely face streamed with tears.

"I am too, love, but Mama Viviane is near. When she comes we'll decide how best to help you. We will help you, you know we will."

Vivie gave a small sob and blessedly sank back into her unfeeling state.

Kate turned to her mother.

"Mama Viviane is almost here."

They all stood in silence around the bed. Vivie now didn't make a sound and neither did her twin and her mother, although both their faces were damp with tears. Stephen suddenly sat down hard in a chair and buried his face in his hands. Alec couldn't stand another moment of this almost hopeless atmosphere. He silently walked out, looking only at the floor.

He hoped by the time Vivie's grandmother arrived his own eyes would be dry.

Chapter Twenty-Three

Alec's first reaction on seeing Vivie's grandmother was sheer astonishment. Lady Lance seemed barely older than her twin daughters and Mama Viviane, Mrs. Devon Randall, seemed only slightly older than Lady Lance. They were all astonishingly beautiful women. That he stood viewing three generations seemed almost impossible.

He seemed to have inherited the position of doorman. He didn't want to disturb Stephen's absorption in Vivie. Stephen seemed almost lost in despair and while Alec didn't want to openly disparage his viewpoint, he refused such defeatist pessimism. The situation was very bad, of course, but some small sliver of his being refused to acknowledge it as hopeless. It just couldn't be. Vivie's Goddess would not allow it.

Alec knew well she could emerge from this onset of polio crippled in some of her limbs, probably her legs. He also knew, although he refused to dwell on it, that Vivie of all the women he'd ever known, would hate most being a cripple mainly because of her generous spirit. She'd hate how even partial paralysis would hinder the good she could do. Others might worry about their looks and their sex appeal but that wouldn't be his Vivie's primary concern.

His beloved Druid must not, simply must not, end up in a wheelchair, or prostrate on a bed for the rest of her life. It would be such a hindrance to her glorious spirit. Even though he knew she would eventually come to accept even crippled inaction with beautiful resignation. She would try to better the world as long as she lived. Still, surely she could serve her Goddess better with her active dedication to others.

The last days had made one thing very clear. This blatant and inconvertible fact surprised even him. Her physical state made small difference to him. He loved her for the very spirit he prayed would not be submerged and somehow lost in the disease they were battling.

With this purity of mind he faced Viviane Randall, wife of the former Commissioner of the Metropolitan Police and the most formidable Druid of them all. He welcomed her knowledge and her expertise. He prayed fervently Mama Viviane held the key to Vivie's recovery. Even though that recovery be slight, as long as she lived he could cope.

Viviane Randall looked at the tall, handsome doctor she'd been prepared to dislike on sight.

"Well," she said, drawing off her gloves. "So you're Stratton. And you've come to sincerely love her."

These Druid women could make him smile a little when nothing else could.

"I do. I'm glad I don't have to convince you. Vivie holds my existence in her two small hands."

Viviane stood on tiptoe and kissed Alec's check.

"I'm glad you're here. I'll do my very best, believe me. Will you take me to her?"

Alec permitted himself his first full smile in weeks.

"Of course, Mrs. Randall. Might I add how glad we all are you've come? Surely you can help Vivie."

He indicated where she should go and motioned her to precede him.

"Her symptoms are very bad, I'll not pretend otherwise. She'd drifting in and out of consciousness. She recognized her twin was here, but then faded out again."

"We'll soon see what we can do," Viviane said.

Something about her made the worst of Alec's doubts disappear. He didn't know how and in what shape the horrible disease would leave Vivie, but he knew with a certainty she would live. After all only her life was truly important.

There was a little spring to his step as together they went to Vivie's bedside.

Somehow, these Druid women would help his love.

Chapter Twenty-Four

Viviane Randall greeted her daughter and Kate with hurried kisses and a soft word to both. Then she turned to Vivie, who was tossing and muttering again.

She smoothed her granddaughter's hair and kissed her forehead, her own eyes glistening with unshed tears.

"Well," she said briskly, "We have a lot of work to do here. First I want to clear up the debilitating aura invading the room. I feel a negativism I would like to dispel. If any of you lack confidence in Vivie's recovery, I ask you to take yourself in hand. I cannot permit such thoughts in this room at this time."

Alec was motionless. Stephen cast an agonized look at Viviane and walked out.

"Come back when you can, Dr. Lovernios," she called after him. "I think we'll need you. Now, Dr. Stratton, I would ask you to find a pair of sleeping pajamas such as a small man might wear."

Alec didn't stop to ask questions. He'd go out and buy a pair immediately. He wasn't even too puzzled. Her grandmother meant to massage or do some such treatment and wanted Vivie more decorously covered than in a hospital gown. It was a simple task, but one he'd be happy to perform. He was pleased, in a way. It meant he might not be banished from Vivie's bed of sickness.

He grinned a little in his mind. With such powerful women in attendance, he felt surprise they permitted a mere man in the same room.

The moment he was gone Viviane turned to the other two women.

"Now tell me everything."

Kate did most of the talking and Viviane listened without speaking.

She sat in thought, holding Vivie's hand all the while.

"I won't try to deny Vivie is very sick indeed. From what you both have told me, the main worry now is the disease has moved to her legs. Her lack of pain there must not progress. We cannot let her become paralyzed. We're going to take turns flexing her legs. One of us will move one leg while another takes the other leg and we alternate the flexing. We're going to need the men to help. Keep Dr. Lovernios out of the room until he gets himself under control. We'll start immediately. When Alec comes back with the pajamas we'll get Vivie in them and then he can help."

Kate raised her eyebrows. "So it's Dr. Lovernios, but not Dr. Stratton."

"Surprised you, did I? Alec loves her, you know, truly loves her."

Kate grinned. "I know. He doesn't think we look all that much alike. Lovernios thinks we're identical."

Morgan smiled. "I always said the man who truly loved one of you would be able to tell you apart. This is the first time a male has passed the test, as far as I know. I think Alec is astonished himself at the depth of his love."

"I'll give him that," said Kate. "But will he measure up to his love? He still has to prove himself to me. Too many bad marks against him in my book."

"We'll see, won't we." Viviane's knowing smile made Kate almost change her mind. Almost.

Kate and Viviane turned to Vivie and Viviane demonstrated what she wanted to do.

"A slow, steady motion is best. A natural bending of the knees, no drastic stretching at all. We'll flex her for ten minutes at a time, then rest ten. We'll give paralysis no chance to set in."

They began and kept it up until Viviane called a halt.

"But this is quite easy," Kate protested. "If the more we do this the more Vivie benefits, I'd be glad to go on."

"No," Viviane said with a slight smile. "I don't want this be anything but easy for Vivie. We do not want to stress her muscles. And you'll find in a few hours it's not as easy as you think."

Two sessions later, even with Morgan filling in and alternating, Kate mentally agreed. When Alec came in with the pajamas, the women took them and dismissed him while they put them on Vivie.

Then Viviane called him back in to take his turn. His thanks at being included were quietly expressed, but his sincerity showed. Kate's hostility softened just a little. Not much, but a little.

Several hours into their effort, Stephen Lovernios appeared at the doorway.

"I would truly like to help," he said. Nothing more was needed, as Viviane welcomed him and explained what they were doing.

They kept up flexing Vivie's legs for two days, alternating between the five of them, so one could be resting while the others kept on. As the hours wore on, the two men insisted they do double duty. It was difficult to flex Vivie's legs properly and still stand straight. Although the men were required to bend over even more than the women, they insisted they take the brunt. They all tried to talk Viviane into letting them do her stint, but she would not allow it. Finally she called a halt.

"We'll want to keep doing this once every hour for a while. Although I believe the most critical period is over, this disease is too treacherous to allow us to take any chances. I'm not nearly as sure as I'd like to be. We'll work out a schedule so we can each have several hours off at a time. I think we can all breathe a little easier. There's a good chance our girl will not be paralyzed. We'll meet other challenges as they appear."

Viviane pushed a lock of her auburn hair off her forehead. A beautiful shade of deep red, vibrant evidence of where her twin granddaughters received their gorgeous coloring. Viviane now showed a little grey, but her hair still retained its luster.

"I want you all to tell me immediately if you feel any resistance to your manipulations. Change can be either good or bad, but I need to know."

She walked out slowly. It was her turn to have some respite. By common consent, no one called her when her next turn came. There were still four of them and they all wanted Viviane and her knowledge to be fresh the next time they needed her. Morgan was also a formidable healer, but she deferred to her mother in this case. Morgan feared her bond with her daughter would distort her perceptions. Viviane, although Vivie's grandmother, hopefully could be more objective. Morgan knew she herself was not objective at all.

Vivie's father, Lord Lance Dellafield, was doubtless even less objective. Devon Randall, Viviane's husband, was probably as bad. A great deal of influence in London's inner circles resided in these two gentlemen. Both of them came daily to the door of the clinic and were refused admittance. Both of them railed against the edict that kept them from their women. But both Viviane and Morgan refused to let their beloved husbands be exposed to Vivie's illness. There was very little knowledge of how poliomyelitis was transmitted. The women didn't want to take a chance.

Alec went one day to investigate the disturbance in the entry hall. Lord Lance Dellafield was insisting on seeing his wife and daughter. The young nurse trying to keep him out could not begin to stand up to the impressive presence of one of the premier politicians in England.

Alec stepped into the middle of the dispute.

"Of course if you truly insist, Lord Lance, none of us will stop you. Nor would I let anyone stop me if I were Vivie's father. I do ask you though to think of Lady Lance. She is stressed almost beyond bearing by Vivie's illness. If by any chance you became ill she would be torn in two."

"Damn you, Stratton. You distressed my child and now have the effrontery to face me and tell me what to do."

Lord Lance, an imposing figure at any time, would have simply run over most opponents.

Alec did not back down.

"I am not telling you what to do, my lord. Not in any respect. I do not have the right to do such a thing."

"Damn you," Lord Lance repeated, this time with less fire. "Will you at least tell my wife I am here and ask her to come into the hall so I can see her? I don't plan to go close to her, but I must know how she is."

"Certainly, my lord. My sympathies are with you both."

Lord Lance scrutinized the young doctor in front of him.

“Why are you here, Stratton?”

“Even before she became ill I found Vivie is more important to me than anything else. It took me far too long to come to my senses, but there’s no place for me to be but here.”

“Humph.” Lord Lance. His lordship’s every inch radiated unmistakable power. Alec knew this from the time he’d sent Vivie weeping in her father’s arms. Now he felt he had the privilege of seeing Lord Lance as few others ever saw him. Desperately worried about both his wife and his daughter and lonely to boot. In spite of his intense concern, Lord Lance still had the grace to smile at the young doctor. Not a big smile, but still a smile.

“I keep running into you, Dr. Stratton, although I don’t yet know what to think of you. If you are here with the rest of my family I assume you’ve passed some kind of test with my women. That’s not easy. You also look completely exhausted. Whatever’s been going on here, I can tell you’re an integral part. I thank you for that.”

Alec’s reply was dignified, even though he felt wrung out by all the conflicting emotions of the last few days. Such gracious words from this man he so admired were difficult to take calmly.

“Thank you, sir. I can tell you I don’t know yet how things will turn out with Vivie. I wish I could. I do know she couldn’t possibly be in better hands than those of your wife and your mother-in-law.”

Lord Lance’s eyebrows arched. “Well, you have come a way to make a statement like that. Now if you would be so kind as to ask my wife to step into the hall I’d appreciate it.”

Alec nodded and turned away. In a few minutes Morgan appeared in the doorway. The sight of her sent Lord Lance striding across the hall as he completely forgot his recent words.

As he folded his wife in his arms, Morgan gave a little sob and burrowed into his large frame.

“Oh, Lance, I can’t help but be glad you came. I don’t want to expose you to Vivie, but surely I can’t carry this horrible disease to a third person. And Mama has cast a protective spell around all us. You can’t know how I needed to see you.”

“Not as much as I needed you.” Lord Lance tilted Morgan’s face so he could bury his lips in hers.

Alec faded into the background. He’d come back to tell Lady Lance he would take her turn with Vivie and to spend as much time as she wanted with her husband. The love these two bore for each other was so palpable it almost beat upon his skin. He turned away after forcing down a large and unexpected lump in his throat.

He didn’t even blink at the thought of Viviane protecting those she loved with her powers as a Druid. His only reaction was gratitude she’d done so. He grinned inwardly as he agreed with Lord Lance he’d indeed come a long way.

Alec walked slowly back to the ward and Vivie's bed. He'd done little so far for his love except take his turn at flexing her limbs. He was grateful to be at her side to do this, but he wished to do so much more.

He walked into the ward to a scene of escalating chaos. Viviane rather desperately massaged Vivie's chest, while the others stood around in panic.

"What's happened?" he questioned tersely.

Kate looked up at him, her eyes, so similar to Vivie's, anguished as he'd not yet seen them.

"She's choking, Alec."

Alec didn't even notice Kate called him by name for the first time. Vivie commanded all his attention. He knew only too well what choking meant. Her throat was closing as a result of the tube to her lungs narrowing. A dreaded effect of polio and one he'd prayed his love would escape.

He rushed to Vivie's bedside. She was indeed choking and she wasn't conscious enough to follow directions or help herself. He didn't take time to check with Mama Viviane. He leaned over her, put his hands on each side of her face, lifted her chin with his thumbs and fastened his mouth over hers. Taking a mighty breath, he blew a blast of his own air as forcibly as he could into her lungs.

A blessed certainty suffused his entire being. He knew, knew without a doubt, he would find the strength he needed. He set about his task with a sure knowledge he was acting correctly to save her. The power would come to him.

He marshaled every ounce of strength he could command. Coming up often to grab a big gulp of air, he continued forcing his breath into her diminishing passage, coercing it to remain open.

Vivie believed all gods were equal. Alec called on them all to help him now, as he labored to halt the constriction of the tube carrying her life's breath. May the gods and Vivie's Goddess continue giving him the vigor he needed to keep enough air flowing.

Everyone else stood silently around, as Viviane motioned them back to let Alec do what he could. After a seemingly interminable length of time, Vivie's color began to change just a little from a frightening grayish-white. Alec noticed the slight alteration with a prayer of thanks in his heart.

He took a deep breath of his own and flexed his back. He knew he couldn't halt his forcing Vivie to breathe, but he could take an instant to snatch some sweet air.

Viviane moved in to clasp his shoulder and place a kiss on his cheek.

"Dr. Alecander Stratton, you've done more than your share. You've shown us all what needs doing. May I now take over from you?"

Alec knew he was the one to do this job. He possessed the necessary strength, he understood with a sweet certainty. Some power beyond himself was helping him. The fates were kind enough to have chosen him.

"No, thank you, madam. I'm doing well."

Alec took time for a brief smile and then went back to compelling Vivie's breathing apparatus to do its work. To his emerging joy, he finally sensed he needed to exert a little less vigor than before. Vivie's attempts to breathe on her own were starting, barely starting, to take over.

He well knew the dreadful results of this disease. Crippling was one of them but being left unable to draw a breath loomed as an even worse fate. With every slight lessening of the need for the powerful propulsion of his enforced breathing, he felt his heart expand in gratitude.

The dear gods or goddesses, whatever powers that be, were rallying to defeat the formidable challenge of her dreadful disease. Vivie hadn't uttered a coherent word in the last two days. She'd tossed and muttered feverishly, but didn't seem in any sense to be with those who so loved her.

He kept on and on with his self-appointed task. He knew nothing for an interminable stretch but the in and out propulsion, whooshing deeply so his breath was as compelling as his strength and his desperation could make it. He thanked all the forces of good for their continued help. He knew he could not have done it on his own.

Finally Viviane tapped him again.

"You've saved her from a great deal, Alec Stratton. If she'd not been able to breathe on her own she had little future. All of our family are in your debt. You can stop now, Alec. She's breathing on her own. Lightly, but she's breathing."

Only a few of Viviane's words got through to Alec. What he did understand was that her grandmother, a healer par excellence, thought Vivie was doing better. He didn't know 'til later that all the while he was laboring so desperately the three Druid women had linked hands in a circle. Praying and helping him with their combined power to possess the strength to last the course.

When he learned this later he smiled to himself and willingly credited them for his unnatural vigor. They were the most marvelous of women.

Now Alec looked up at Viviane, almost afraid to hope and then as he paused he saw Vivie's chest moving quietly on its own. He straightened with a sigh that vibrated his exhausted frame. He smiled at Vivie's grandmother.

"We did it, didn't we? She's going to need a lot of time to recover, but she'll survive. We did it, didn't we?"

Viviane leaned over and kissed Alec's cheek. "Yes, Alec, we did it. Go rest, my dear. We'll watch her carefully."

Alec straightened and then staggered as he took a few steps away from Vivie's bed. Stephen and Viviane were both instantly beside him, Stephen with awe in his expression and Viviane with a loving look.

"Rest, Alec. We can easily take over now. The worst is well and truly past. You have more than proved yourself an able and conscientious doctor."

Viviane took his hand and literally led him to the bed next to Vivie's, pulling a blanket over him and swinging up his legs. Alec sighed and almost instantly fell asleep.

There was a moment's silence, which Stephen broke.

"He's a better man than he knows."

His head was bowed, but still he spoke.

Morgan and Kate both nodded their heads. "He is indeed," said Kate softly.

There was no need to lower their voices. Alec was deeply asleep. The others took up their vigil again at Vivie's bedside.

Watching the slight rise and fall of her chest. Watching her breathe, with deepest gratitude in their hearts. Both to the Goddess and to her chosen instrument, Dr. Alec Stratton.

Chapter Twenty-Five

Vivie opened her eyes to a welcoming world. Kate held her hand, tears streaming down her face.

"I knew you were on your way back to us when your mind called to me a while ago. Thank God you're fully with us again, twin."

Vivie tried to push herself up in bed, but was too weak. Instead she reached up to touch Kate's face.

"Why are you crying, Kate? I'm fine, except for a little fatigue."

"Call it whatever you want, my child. The rest of us call it being seriously ill."

It was her mother's voice, as Morgan leaned over and kissed her daughter, her lips lingering on her forehead.

Viviane too rushed over and the four women hugged each other with profound gratitude. Vivie still didn't know the extent of her illness, but that could wait. She knew enough to be thankful they were together.

Stephen came a little later, adding his greetings and showing plainly his deep concern. Vivie said little. Had Alec gone home then, before she wakened? She'd cherished a small hope he too would be at her beside. She said nothing, afraid once again his feelings were not as deep as she'd come to think. Had she trusted him again, only to be crushed with disappointment?

Stephen saw her look around as a shadow came over her face, although she strove not to change expression.

"Alec has been here with you every minute, Vivie." He took her hand and held it lightly. "The man recently fought for hours with all his strength forcing you to breathe normally. He literally breathed for you. Your grandmother sent him to bed. If you turn your head just a little to your left, you'll see him sleeping a sleep of true exhaustion in the bed next to you."

She turned her head and tears came to her eyes as she absorbed Stephen's words. Alec was exhausted because of her. He'd fought hours for her, trying to save her. This was not the self-centered Alec she'd thought she knew and loved anyway. And Stephen. He was speaking of Alec with respect and admiration. Evidently there was a great deal here she didn't yet understand.

"Have I been sick long, then?"

This time her grandmother answered. "Almost a week love, in this last phase. It will take you a while to get your strength back, particularly in your legs, but with exercise you can be as good as new."

Vivie believed her grandmother utterly and shut her eyes in peace. She felt too weak to prop her eyes open another minute. Just at the last, before she let her eyelids fall, she turned her head again so she could see Alec in the bed next to hers. She fell asleep with a smile of sweet gratitude on her lips.

Still her recovery was not trouble-free. On the next day, as soon as she fully awoke, Mama Viviane appeared at her bedside.

"We've got to build up the muscle strength in your legs again, my dear. I'm sure you'll be ready to disown me as your grandmother before long, but I'm going to push you to the limit. Every day. We'll start as soon as you've eaten some soup and with two of us helping you I want you to flex your legs at the knee. As long as you can at a time."

Vivie smiled. "That doesn't sound so bad, Mama Viviane."

"Wait and see, my girl," said her grandmother.

Soon enough tears were rolling down Vivie's cheeks as she realized how little strength was left in her legs. Viviane pushed her as she'd threatened, but finally let her rest. Vivie closed her eyes, finding it hard to believe she'd become so weak.

"Don't fight it, love. Your strength will come back to you. Your grandmother and I both promise."

At the sound of Alec's deep voice she turned her head and found herself staring into his beautiful, beloved eyes. He was kneeling by her bedside so their faces were almost on a level. She hadn't realized how disorienting it could be to be constantly looking up at someone towering above her bed. Alec's understanding and thoughtfulness moved her deeply.

Alec smiled at her with tenderness and what she could swear was love. His smile touched her heart, even though he looked like a rather scroungy pirate. He hadn't shaved for two days and his dark beard gave him a sinister look quite at odds with his expression. He looked mussed and disheveled and must have just come from the bed beside her to kneel by her own. He'd never been so handsome to her. She'd once thought of him as an ascetic wolf. Neither word fit him now.

"Alec." She breathed his name with the love she felt for him. She didn't realize she'd said Alec with just the same intonation when he'd first come to her bedside days ago. Consequently she didn't know why tears appeared at the corners of his arresting eyes.

"Why are you upset?" she whispered. "Am I not getting better?"

"Of course you are. I'm just so glad to have you talk to me. It will take some time to get truly well and you mustn't get discouraged. You're been one very sick young lady."

"I guess so," she murmured. Although she fought she could not keep her eyes open.

"Don't leave me," she begged, as her eyelids closed once again.

Alec put his forehead on the bed beside her as he took her hand and kissed it.

"Never again," he whispered.

Vivie must have heard him for she smiled as she drifted off into curative sleep.

* * * * *

A week went by, with Vivie slowly gaining strength. Much too slowly for her impatient mind. She could move her legs, but had little feeling in them. Mama Viviane and her mother both assured her more sensation would come, but she couldn't convince herself.

One day, she lay there trying not to fret. She pushed herself up on her pillows and stared into space. Although she kept telling herself how lucky she was to be alive, she wanted more than that. She wanted to feel useful again.

She greeted Stephen with relief from her dismal thoughts.

"Hullo, Stephen, I'm glad to see you. I tend to feel sorry for myself far too often. I hope you've come to distract me."

Stephen pulled the chair by her bed a little closer.

"I suppose you could call it distraction," he said. His handsome face smiled at her, but his eyes did not. Vivie had been dreading the day he wanted to talk to her about her feeling for Alec. She was still too uncertain to discuss that with anyone, except maybe Alec and he seemed in no hurry.

Stephen took her hands and held them both lightly between his two big ones.

"The clinic is doing a little better, Vivie."

She smiled her pleasure. She knew they'd closed the doors during her illness to prevent spread of the polio. At the reopening last week patients were scarce, but now it seemed they were slowly returning.

Stephen fastened her gaze with his.

"I want to leave as soon as we can find a replacement for me, my dear. I think the new man will have an easier time if he comes in quickly, without me to distract him. I have a man picked out and he's willing to start the end of this week."

"But Alec—"

"Oh, Alec might check in now and then to keep things running, but he'll be too busy with his new position to do much."

Vivie opened and then shut her mouth. She knew nothing of what Stephen meant about Alec. New position? Was he not going back to London Hospital then? He hadn't said a word to her, but then there'd been little talk about anything but her progress. No words of his plans, no words of lasting love. Loving affection yes, but she craved more. She swallowed hard. For now she must concentrate on Stephen, her dear friend who planned to leave her very soon.

She shook her head in distress. "No, no, Stephen. I can't bear to have you leave."

“And I can’t bear to stay, my love.” He bent his head and touched his forehead to her hands.

There was no answer she could possibly make to that heartbreaking statement. She knew her face plainly showed her dismay. He kissed her forehead and they sat in silence for a moment. His clutch on her hands was painfully tight, but she said not a word.

Vivie knew she must conquer her own feelings and send Stephen off with no additional worries about her.

“Where will you go?” she asked quietly.

A brief grin lightened his face a little. “You won’t believe this, but I think the Pyrenees. I’m a dab hand with languages and will soon find my way around. Of course a doctor’s kit always helps make friends. And I’m a bard, remember? I’m rather looking forward to singing for my supper once again. I heard there were once Druids that far south and I intend to verify that if I can.”

Vivie fought down a sob. She and Stephen had been through so much and she esteemed him beyond any man but Alec. At one time she would have said more than Alec, although it would never have been true of her heart. Now Alec was daily proving himself more than she’d hoped. Alec held her heart. As Stephen doubtless knew.

And she could not have them both.

“I knew there were Druids in Germany and France, so I suppose it’s possible,” she said.

Stephen’s face cleared a little as he saw she was trying to make this wrenching farewell as easy as possible. Still as she watched she saw him obviously fighting to keep his composure.

He abruptly jumped to his feet. Loosening his hold on her hands, he raised and kissed them both with soft kisses full of love.

“Blessed be, little Druid. Blessed be for all of Druid time and beyond.”

His voice was soft and loving and he immediately strode from her bed.

She turned her head to her pillow and let the tears stream. She doubted if she would see him again in this lifetime.

Through her sorrow for Stephen the thought kept intruding. She must let Stephen go, knowing her heart belonged to Alec. But what was Alec planning? Did it include her in any way? Why hadn’t he yet spoken of a future for them?

She could bear a lot, but a future without Alec would truly devastate her.

She didn’t know how she could face life without him. Now that he’d raised her hopes, was he going to let her down yet again?

She buried her face in her hands to hide her too-ready tears.

Chapter Twenty-Six

Alec wondered if he'd given Vivie enough time to grow stronger. He longed to claim her, but he wanted to be fair to her. He knew Stephen was planning to leave and he'd stay if Vivie gave him one word of hope. He'd come to value Stephen as a friend and would miss him. He thought Vivie harbored no stronger feeling for Stephen than a deep friendship, but he'd stay out of the way so he wouldn't influence her. Stephen was a wonderful man and deserved his chance.

He owed both of them so much, difficult as it was to keep quiet. Devilish difficult.

Besides, he had no right to speak of the love in his heart until he disclosed his past. Boston and his early years. He'd vowed never to mention it to anyone but he owed Vivie complete honesty. He'd been slow coming to this conclusion, but he knew in his heart he must tell her.

He hadn't checked on Vivie today as there'd been a run in the clinic of children showing the symptoms of the flu. All of them must be checked carefully as to exposure and family history, as the whole clinic was crossing fingers no more polio cases would appear.

Vivie continued to make progress. She walked more each day, holding on to Kate's arm. Mama Viviane and Lady Lance were home in their husbands' beds, but checked several times a day.

He knew Kate went out walking with Vivie and Vivie usually napped after her walk. She'd asked for a bed to be set up in her office so the ward was available for patients. The bed took up most of the small room, but at least she now could have privacy.

Vivie was jubilant when she first walked to her new quarters.

"Wonderful. Just wonderful. I feel less of a patient already."

"You have more privacy, but you mustn't abuse it, my dear."

Mama Viviane was showing Vivie just how to do a new exercise with her legs and smiled at her granddaughter's questioning look.

"Just don't overdo it, Vivie. I know you're anxious to be completely yourself and I suspect you might try to exercise even more than I've suggested. You mustn't, my love. Too much is as bad as too little."

Alec, standing in the doorway, was delighted with her words. Vivie's demanding determination would be sure to drive her to excess without her grandmother's wise counsel.

He made his way to Vivie's office quietly and stood looking at her. She slept lightly, her breath barely disturbing the sheet covering her. She wore one of her pairs of men's

pajamas. She now had on the first pair he'd rushed out to buy and it was a garish pattern not at all suitable to a beautiful woman. Still she seemed to like the way it felt. Even the smallest man's size was too big on her slender frame and she tied the waist around her with a sash. She proclaimed her outfit just the thing for a hospital stay.

Her top button was unfastened and he could easily see the curves of both exquisite breasts. She was exposed almost to her nipples. His trousers tightened and he leaned over to draw the sheet over her. It was all he could do not to stroke those tempting mounds.

She opened her eyes, blushing as she recognized the ardor blazing in his. Looking down quickly, she saw the opened top and blushed even more.

"I guess this garment is getting too loose in the wrong places. I'd better ask Kate to replace it."

"Don't worry on my account," he said with a grin. "I like the view from here very much."

He was still leaning above her, so he dipped a little more and tasted her lips. It had been so long. So very long. He lingered longer than he'd meant before he tore himself away.

He straightened, willing his body to behave itself. He had no right to even kiss her until she knew his past.

The time had come to tell her everything.

He shut the door to her office and pulled up a chair to sit down beside her.

"I have a story to tell you, Vivie. I should have told you sooner, but it never seemed to be the right time. You were too sick, or we were not alone. It's not a story I want anyone else to hear."

He used one finger to smooth the worry lines appearing between her eyebrows. He feared she might turn away from him in disgust when she knew what he was. He steeled himself and began to speak.

"It's a story about a young boy growing up in the slums of Boston. I know the London stews are distressing, but Boston's are just as bad. I think slums the world over are about the same. I never really knew my father, as he left when I was four. He sent money from time to time, but we could never count on it. My mother took in sewing. Night after night she sat up working while I studied. She made me study from the first, convinced learning was the only way out of poverty."

He stopped and took both her hands in his and then continued with a twisted smile. "This is so hard to tell you, Vivie. If I didn't feel I must I'd never utter a word on the subject. I've buried it inside me for so long."

She started to speak but he hushed her. "No, I must finish now. I might never have the courage again. And I want everything between us to be filled with truth."

He paused and then took a deep breath.

“In spite of my mother’s care, I hung around pool halls and card rooms. I became quite fascinated in why people seemed to lose so much money on card games. It seemed simple to me. You just memorized each card as it was played. I approached an older, quite respectable looking man one day and persuaded him to stake me to a game. In return I’d split by profits with him. I told him how I meant to do it. I know now he was incredulous and thought I must just be lucky, but deemed it worth the amusement. For some reason he couldn’t believe I could memorize so many cards. I mostly won, of course. We soon entered into a partnership and he eventually became almost as interested in my education as my mother.”

Alec shut his eyes for a long moment and only opened them when Vivie took one of her hands back. He froze and started to rise, but then sat back down when he realized with astonishment she was kissing his hand.

“My valiant knight,” she said.

He smiled weakly and continued. “My benefactor, a Mr. Henderson, put my share of our earnings in a separate account and insisted I go back to school. To put it briefly, I gambled my way through school, then college and then medical school. I picked up a few trappings of sophistication along the way, but mostly I played cards and studied. Mr. Henderson died when I was halfway through medical school and left me his fortune. He was a fine man, Vivie. A true gentleman in the best sense of the word. After graduation I wanted a fresh start where people wouldn’t know my disreputable past. My mother died just after I graduated.”

“And your perfect English accent?” Vivie asked. “I thought at the very least you were a Boston Brahmin.”

Alec’s laugh was bitter. “The very opposite, my dear. I studied under a British professor in graduate school, admired his speech and learned to talk exactly like him. It wouldn’t have mattered, I could just have easily picked up the accent in two weeks here. Another very minor talent of mine. Anyway I didn’t want to stay in Boston. England needed doctors and coming here was a heaven-sent opportunity for me to start a new life.”

Vivie stroked his hand all through his recital and now finally held it to her cheek.

“Thank you for telling me. The story is greatly to your credit, you know.”

He jumped to his feet, snatching his hand away and turning his back to her. The anguish in his voice made him sound angry instead of distressed.

“Vivie, there’s simply no need to be so blasted kind. I’m a boy from the slums of Boston who gambled his way to success. You’re the granddaughter of a duke and duchess. Nothing can change those two facts.”

He took two steps toward the door.

“I don’t want to change them.” Vivie’s soft voice reached deep into his misery and somehow stopped his flight. “It’s a story you should tell your children and your grandchildren, Alec. A truly remarkable story of a remarkable man.”

He wheeled back and knelt by her bed again, this time not minding if she saw the tears in his eyes.

“Thank you, Vivie. Thank you, my love. Even if you’re decidedly exaggerating my worth, I thank you.”

He felt her hand on his hair as she stroked it. He struggled to keep a modicum of composure and never even thought of the fact he’d not mentioned he expected his grandchildren to be hers also.

Vivie held tight on his hand. “I have one question to ask, Alec. Did you tell Cissie any of your story?”

He was sure his astonishment showed. “Cissie? Why would I tell her anything so personal? Of course not.”

Her face had seemed a little shadowed to him, but now it cleared with a blazing smile.

“I’m so glad you said that.”

He buried his face in the bedclothes beside her until he’d regained control. Then he lifted his head and looked her directly in her shining green eyes.

“Cissie never meant a thing to me except a stepping stone. A stone to where it turned out I didn’t want to be. You’re everything any worthwhile man could even dream of having. I want to share everything with you. All that I am and possibly will be.”

Her smile was now radiant and he kissed her as she lifted her willing lips to his ardent ones.

Surely they’d passed the worst of their tribulations.

What could go wrong to spoil the shining life together he could so clearly see?

He gave a mock growl and gathered her in his arms.

He kissed her with all the love in his grateful and joyful heart.

Chapter Twenty-Seven

The next morning Alec gravitated at once to Vivie's bed, as he always did. Leaning over, he placed his lips on her. In reverence and in love. He was still almost too overcome by her generous spirit to know how to cope. Until he'd met Vivie he thought he'd never tell any woman of his past, no matter what he must do to disguise his early agonies. His love for Vivie made deceit impossible.

He leaned over and claimed her lips in a lover's kiss.

When he felt little response he looked closely at her, but she lowered her eyelids.

"Your kiss always intoxicates me, my love."

He tried to tell her of his love in this roundabout way, but found the clouded look in her eyes alarming.

"What is it, Vivie? Did I say something wrong?"

She shook her head as if unwilling to speak.

"Now what did I just say? Let's see. Your kiss is intoxicating? No, that wouldn't be upsetting and anyway you know that." He grinned wickedly. "My rather male reactions have certainly proven your power over me. 'My love'? But you know you're my love. I don't know what I—"

He stopped as she turned her head away and refused to look at him.

"Vivie? Vivie, you do know you're my love, don't you? My love for all of our lives?"

He watched anxiously as the clouds in her eyes changed to joy.

He dropped on his knees beside the bed, taking one of her hands and holding it between his two big ones.

"My dearest love, can you have any doubts? You mean everything in the world to me. You're more important than anything now or can be in the future. No one will ever love you as much as I do. No one could. No one in any of our lifetimes. You must know that."

Her eyes were lit with green fires of elation.

"You never said quite that," she whispered. "You've hinted, but you never said."

He gathered her in his arms and kissed her face and then her lips, letting his own linger until he felt an answering flare.

"Just wait 'til I get you out of that bed and into my own," he murmured.

"Pardon me," said an amused voice. Kate was standing at the foot of the bed, smiling at them both. "I can come back later if you want."

"Kate." Vivie blushed a fiery red and grinned at her twin. "I didn't feel you coming. I guess Alec is more distraction than I knew."

"As he should be, love."

Vivie smiled at her twin, just before her expression changed to dismay even as she looked up at Kate.

"Oh no, not you too."

Vivie's voice sounded so aghast Alec looked at her in puzzlement.

"She's leaving too, Alec. She's going back to Paris very soon. I hate, hate, hate these departures. Why can't all the ones I love stay in one place?"

Kate's face was solemn. "You know I have to go back, twin. I've stayed too long as it is. My maestro is chewing violin bows and spitting out the pieces."

Although her words were light, her expression was not. Alec marveled again at the extraordinary bond between these two. Vivie was definitely more beautiful, but they were both striking women. Each of them brilliant in her own field and both with loving hearts that were the most exceptional trait of each.

"Don't take it so hard, Vivie. You know we'll talk to each other all the time."

Alec's startled expression mirrored his horrible thought. "Do you two—?" He stammered and couldn't quite put it into words, but Kate caught on.

"No, Alec, we don't. Private moments are automatically out of bounds."

Alec knew he was the one flushing to the tips of his ears. "I couldn't help but wonder," he muttered.

Vivie and Kate looked at each other and broke into laughter. Alec looked at the two giggling girls and was rather proud of himself. He'd been a timely diversion. There were worse things to be.

Kate sat by Vivie's bed the rest of the day and into the night. Alec couldn't imagine what they found to talk about in all that time, but they were seldom silent. He caught a few words as he walked by occasionally and he heard a few "remembers", names he didn't recognize and lots more giggles.

The next morning Kate was gone. Vivie took her usual walk around the clinic, this time by herself, her face unnaturally composed. Alec watched her in silence. Trying to guess how he would feel in similar circumstances and not doing very well. The bond between these two was unbelievably strong. Still, Alec left her alone for most of the day. In the afternoon he came to her room.

"Hullo, my love," he said softly.

She opened her eyes, a dulled version of her usually brilliant green. They brightened when she spotted him.

"Alec. I'm so glad you're here."

"I plan to always be where you need me to be, Vivie."

She gave him her long "Druid look" and finally spoke.

"I can see you think you mean what you say. But you're going away too. Everyone I love goes away."

He grabbed her hands. Damn, he'd wanted to tell her himself. There were so many plans to make and he wanted her to advise him without fear or hesitation.

"It must have been Stephen," His voice was grim and slow. "I've not mentioned the job offer to anyone else."

"I think he thought I knew. He made a casual remark and I asked no questions. Can you tell me now?"

"Of course, darling. I've been dying to talk to you about it, but wanted you to concentrate on getting well and being with Kate."

She pushed herself up on her pillows and he raised her shoulders and plumped the pillows for her.

"I've been offered a job in a research center. They're doing such interesting work and they've said I can join the team investigating polio, what causes it, how it's transmitted, if there's a way to avoid it. I can think of nothing I'd rather do. Nothing. I would have loved the challenge even if you hadn't been stricken, but now it's seems vital to me to try to find what mowed you down. If you approve, that is."

She was silent for another long moment. "It sounds wonderful for you. A new opportunity and one that will intrigue you. I'd hoped just a little you'd take over the clinic, but this will be much more interesting for you."

The words were fine, but the lack of enthusiasm was not. What was going on in his lovable Druid's brain?

"But will you like it? I forgot to say the research laboratory is in Crowdon. Not too far, but still out of London proper. I don't think you're tied to actually staying in London, are you?"

This time a haughty flash in her eyes alerted him he'd done something wrong. Again. He didn't see what, but knew Vivie's anger was peaking and he'd soon find out.

"So I'm included in this offer to you? As a nurse, perhaps? I am a fairly good one, I know."

Alec was quite sure his jaw dropped open.

"Vivie," he started to stammer. "What—oh, damn and blast. I just made mice feet out of my own proposal. Oh damn."

Vivie still looked stern, although her eyes twinkled just the barest bit.

"That was a proposal, Dr. Stratton? I never would have guessed."

Alec fell to his knees and grabbed both her hands, kissing the fingers frantically.

"Vivie, you're my darling. My darling Druid. I'm sorry, I'm sorry. How could I be so dimwitted?"

She now frankly grinned. "It's hard to understand, Dr. Stratton."

“Please, please Vivie, will you marry me as soon as your strength returns? Will you please tell me if you want me to take the job, for there’s no way I’ll accept it unless you go with me as my wife? And will you please call me Alec again? Right now?”

He scooted on his knees nearer her face and leaning over, kissed her with every ounce of love and prayer in him.

She cradled his face in her hands and kissed him back. It was a sweet kiss, full of passionate promise and her overflowing love.

“Yes, Alec. Yes to all your questions.”

He pressed his head to her breast, loving the soft feel of her firm flesh and thinking soon he could do this as often as he wished. But then, feeling his body harden and knowing this was not the time, he lifted his face to hers.

“Thank you, God. And you too, Vivie.”

They both laughed, the ringing laugh of two joyful people, as they held hands tightly and began to make plans. There was not a cloud in their future.

How could there be? They had met and overcome so very much.

Chapter Twenty-Eight

Vivie progressed rapidly and she gloried in taking walks with Alec, planning for their life together. Her Duchess grandmother assured her the clinic would be supported and be made into a training model. It would specialize in dedicated nurses and doctors who wanted more interaction with patients without the rigid structure of hospitals. Vivie would keep an interest in the clinic after her marriage, making sure it ran smoothly. She had no worries beside the one she could not admit to Alec. The really dreadful one she tried to shove out of her mind. Like most worries one tries to sweep aside, this one nagged at her and thoroughly cut up her peace.

Alec divided his time between the clinic and learning as much as he could about the research being done at the polio center. He put rigid brakes on his fervent desire for Vivie. He wanted nothing so much as to take her to bed, but knew it wouldn't be fair to her. She was still weak and vulnerable and he wanted her to know exactly what she was doing when he finally poured his passion into her body. He therefore channeled his considerable energy into his work.

They were walking along one day holding hands. Vivie still hadn't completely retrieved her graceful Druid glide. She moved a little stiffly although Alec assumed she would eventually walk as gracefully as before. If not, it didn't matter.

With no warning at all, Vivie stopped and faced him, her face too serious for his liking.

"I have a request, Alec."

He smiled and took both her hands in his, kissing the fingers before he folded each hand into his own larger ones.

"Whatever it is, love, if it's in my power you've got it."

"No," she wailed. "This is important. I want you to realize what you're saying when you answer me."

"Vivie?" His voice lowered in the usual cautious tone of a bewildered male.

"I want you to take me to your bed tonight."

Alec opened his mouth and then shut it. What was the best thing to say? That there was nothing in the world he wanted more? Or that he couldn't help but wonder at her request? Why the urgency he could sense in her voice and the over-tight grip of her hands?

He decided on both. "I want above anything in this world to have you in my bed, Vivie. You must know this. I can hardly control myself at times when I'm with you. You must know that also. The reactions of my male body certainly betray me. But why now? Why tonight?"

She gave a kind of half sob, deep in her throat.

"If you don't I won't marry you."

Completely shocked, he took her face in his hands.

"Let's go over to the bench over there and talk this out. I can hardly believe you know what you're saying. You'd throw away our future if I don't take you to bed? Tonight? Is that really what you're saying?"

He grasped her hand firmly and led her to the bench. He felt much more than upset, he was downright insulted. Then he took a calming gulp of air. There had to be a great deal behind this he'd better discover before he started railing at her.

As soon as they were seated he took her face again in his hands. "I don't know what this is about, so you'd better tell me." He knew his voice had cooled, although he tried his best to act as usual.

She lowered her eyes and refused to look at him while she answered.

"I don't think I have normal responses below my waist. I don't feel things the way I used to. I won't marry you if I'm handicapped in this way. I want to know, once and for all if I'm ever going to have the proper sensations."

He truly didn't know what to say. How long had this fear haunted her? Why, when he loved her so much, had he not seen her despair? Finally he voiced his most pressing thought.

"Why is this so important to you, Vivie? Aren't you willing to trust in me and give us a chance to work this out? You're still improving and will continue to improve. No matter your lack of initial response, we can see it through until things get better. Then again perhaps nothing needs to be worked out."

She tore her hands away. "No. If I'm deficient in this vital area I want to know it before I ruin your life. You've known other women, of course. Any man your age has. I won't be lesser in my response than others you've pleased."

He tried to catch her in his arms but she jolted to her feet. He stood also and forced her to turn to him.

"Vivie, darling, I trust our love will see us through, although due to your illness it might take a little longer than we both want. I'm willing to wait, love. Forever, if need be. My love for you is more than physical. Don't insult me by pretending that's all it is."

She turned and started to walk away, as rapidly as her half-awkward gait allowed.

He followed and tried to stop her and hold her to him, but she twisted and fought him so he let her go. As she started to walk off again he caught up with her and this time, was able to clutch her firmly to him.

"It's not such a terrible thing you're asking of me, you know." He smiled at her but she didn't return his smile. She lowered her head and refused to look at him, so he finally capitulated.

"I'm more than willing, my dearest, if you feel this strongly. But where could we possibly go? My place is full of bachelors roaming around the hall in various states of

undress. I'd like to provide a bed strewn with flowers, but can't do it on such short notice."

She still didn't smile and he knew this was definitely vital to her. She still would not meet his gaze.

With an inward sigh he surrendered. Although he wasn't pleased with the turn of events.

"If you stay at the clinic I'll be back around nine. Is this acceptable, my love?"

"Yes." Her answer was clipped, but she grasped his hand and held it tightly as they walked back to the clinic. He left her at the door, after a light kiss on her lips. He knew she watched him leave. He only hoped she didn't know how worried he was.

He hated having his whole future hanging on one amatory performance. A staged one at that. He only hoped he didn't do anything to spoil his chances for what he was sure would be near-perfect happiness with Vivie.

Yet any male would surely worry about calling up love on demand. He had no shortage of masculine passions, even though he hadn't been able to summon up much reaction to Cissie. Vivie was different. He need only sense her presence in a room to feel his body harden. Sometimes he felt like a stone statue when he turned away to keep her from seeing his erection.

Surely his deep love would see them through. Although he couldn't help but wish he'd staged his own seduction scene. In a strange sense, she was seducing him!

He didn't like this development at all. Although he desired her to the point of desperation, he didn't like being forced to take her to bed on an artificial schedule.

Even for a man deeply in love it was daunting.

Chapter Twenty-Nine

Alec appeared at the clinic promptly at nine. Vivie unlocked the door and let him in with a wavering smile. The rest of the staff was nowhere in sight and he knew she must have used some kind of trickery to get them to leave her alone this late at night. She was too beloved for them to abandon her.

"How did you manage to get everyone to leave?" he asked.

"Simple," she answered with a fleeting grin. "I told them you were already back and in my office."

He folded her in his arms for a gentle kiss. "So you've already blackened my name?"

She smelled so good! And looked even better. She'd evidently sent for more of her clothes from Emily's as she wore a flimsy night garment of some sort with an even lacier robe. As she moved away from the door and into the light he could see her nipples and the bright auburn curls on the mound between her legs. He breathed a short sigh of relief. He'd have no trouble fulfilling his function. His trousers were so tight he could hardly move. Even if he disliked the fact this encounter was not spontaneous, his body, overflowing with love for Vivie, was more than eager to cooperate.

He handed her a single red rose as he kissed her again. A demanding kiss and she recognized his rising passion and wound her arms around his neck as she pressed against his already hard body.

"Well," she said. "You aren't reluctant after all."

"Hardly," he said, with a grin. Vivie giggled at his pun and pushed away from him a little.

"I was raised on the Victorian book, *The Language of Flowers*. Do you know it?"

He was nuzzling her neck and didn't really care about an old book. "Not really. Should I?"

"No, I wouldn't expect you to. But my mother and grandmother were both courted with flowers and their symbolism. A single red rose means love and respect."

"Then I made a good choice, didn't I? Do the feelings multiply with the number of roses? If so I'll buy you dozens on our wedding day."

He suddenly didn't want any more talk. He just wanted to take her to bed. He'd be gentle and considerate knowing how worried she was. Surely someone who responded to him as sweetly as Vivie would find nothing but joy in the joining of their bodies.

Just the thought was enough to harden him into an amazing rigidity. Neither one of them had removed an article of clothing and he was ready to take her even if he backed

her against the wall. He'd never felt this intensity of desire for anyone, but then, this was Vivie. His love.

He gently unwound her arms from around his neck, kissing each of her hands as he did so.

"I could stand here all night kissing you, but I'd rather take you to bed."

Vivie colored and looked as if she was ready to run down the corridor.

"Vivie, my darling Druid, I'll guarantee this will be a good experience for you. Please trust me in his. I love you and I'll always take care of you."

She burrowed her face in his chest.

"It's not you, Alec. But I'm so afraid."

"Don't be," he whispered as he took her hand and led her toward her office. As a wedding bower it left a good deal to be desired, but this wasn't his main concern. Getting Vivie to relax was his first priority.

He tenderly took off her flimsy wrapper. As soon as he did he realized he was going to have to exercise iron control to keep from taking her too fast and too hard. The light shimmering behind her silken gown outlined the body of any man's secret dream. Her delightful curves emphasized her small waist and beautiful breasts. Those breasts were peaked and showed only her incipient passion, not her fears. Rosy nipples enticed him so he leaned and took one of them in his mouth, suckling her through the flimsy covering. She stiffened and made an abortive attempt at pushing him away, but he held her hands.

He wanted to kiss every luscious inch, but knew he couldn't last that long.

"That makes me feel so strange, Alec. Are you sure you should be doing this?"

"Very sure," he said, gently pushing her down on the narrow bed. There was little place for him to go but on top of her, which was just fine with him.

He felt her tense under him and he immediately began to kiss his way down her body. She softened under him and he whispered, "Raise your arms, my love,"

She hesitated, but then did as he asked and he pulled her gown over her head.

She immediately tried to cover her breasts with her hands, but he pulled them away from her enticing body.

"Alec, at least turn out the light."

"No, Vivie. I want to see you. All of you. It's only a little desk lamp. You're gorgeous, Vivie. So very beautiful."

She finally showed some of the spirit that was so much a part of her.

"Then I refuse to be the only one naked. Take off your clothes, Alec."

He didn't want to leave her for a moment and then grinned to himself as he realized he wasn't making much sense. He rose and began to strip. When he was down to his underpants he saw her huge eyes fastened on his body and abruptly stopped.

"Vivie?"

She let her eyes wander over him, seemingly appreciative of what she could see.

"You have magnificent shoulders, Alec. And yet you're as trim and elegant as I suspected. You're a beautiful man."

He chuckled. "Men aren't beautiful, love."

"You are," she said, so earnestly he smiled and then went to the bed and gently edged her over so he could lie beside her.

"I don't want to push you off the bed. Do you think we can manage to both fit if we get just a little closer?" His voice was teasing and she grinned.

"I think I could work on it," she said with a note of mischief that sent his already soaring anticipation even higher.

He lay as close as possible and took her in his arms, holding her at first as if she were a piece of delicate chinoiserie. She even looked like a rare piece of porcelain. Pale skin stained a beautiful pink in the most enticing places. Eyes glowing a brilliant green. Deep red hair. But right now his colorful jewel was worrying her upper lip between her teeth.

"Are you sure you want to go through with this, Vivie?"

Even as he said the words he wondered why he was taking such a chance. He'd probably dissolve in a molten puddle if she turned back now.

Her eyes flew to his. "I'm sure," she said and began to tug at his drawers.

With a half growl he pushed her hands away and stripped himself bare, grabbing her to him the second he could. She was a virgin and already anxious. He didn't want the sight of his rampant male body to alarm her.

There was a short silence while he kissed her lips, taking them with a depth of passion he'd never before allowed himself. He parted her lips with his tongue and tasted her incredible sweetness, not stopping until she responded. He could feel her hesitation and then she invaded his mouth with mounting enthusiasm, mingling her tongue with his. He held her face with both hands at first, then used one hand to hold her hips tightly against his body.

She stopped kissing him.

"Are you unusually big, Alec?" she whispered.

"No, I don't think so," he said, attacking her face again with a series of small kisses. "This is very much what nature intended."

Actually he thought he might be telling a little falsehood, but it was in a good cause. He could feel the tension in her body and didn't want it to mount higher.

He set to work trying to gentle her with his hands and mouth, kissing his way to her navel while he caressed her almost wildly.

"Do you realize your body is feeling me, Vivie? It must have for you to notice the size of my erection against you. You wouldn't have questioned me otherwise."

Her breath was coming in shorter breaths. "Yes, I did notice, didn't I? I'm feeling a lot of things right now, Alec. Maybe it will be all right after all."

"If not we'll try again and again until we make it right, my love."

He cupped her breasts and kissed them, taking each hard little peak into his mouth. Kissing and suckling her nipples seemed to set her on fire and she soon ground her hips against his. When he moved his lips to her navel she still writhed beneath him. But when his lips touched her smooth stomach her rapture didn't seem to increase. He fondled her, seeking out and caressing her mound, parting the folds below it so he could discover the seat of her passion. Finding the little nubbin of her desire wasn't difficult and he began to caress her small bud. She responded with little gasps and jerky motions of her hips, but not with the abandon he wanted.

He prayed to her Goddess Vivie was wrong about her lack of feeling in this most vital part of her body. He was fast becoming almost overwhelmed with desire. Perhaps he'd better forge ahead while he still kept some control. She was moist and ready for him, even though more passive than he wanted.

With trepidation he placed the tip of his phallus at her opening. She was right, he was large for her to accommodate. That didn't surprise him, as he couldn't remember ever being so driven by desire or so enlarged. He slowly began to enter her, stopping frequently to let her adjust to his size. Stopping was almost torture for him, as her walls closed tightly around him, demanding he race even faster.

When he probed her maidenhead he paused, leaning his forehead against hers. If her hymen was resistant they could both be in trouble.

"Why are you stopping, Alec?" she whispered.

"To give you time to adjust to me, love," he answered, mentally crossing his fingers.

He lunged forward, feeling the membrane easily tear. Thank you, God, he breathed to himself.

"Alec. I felt that. It hurt a little. It wasn't bad, but I felt it."

He lowered his forehead to hers. "No more pain, Vivie. The rest will be pleasure."

If she felt her maidenhead let him through, he hoped it meant the sensation was coming back in this very susceptible area. He set up a rhythm, surging in and drawing out and to his joy she struggled to find his pace and adjust her own hips to his lunging ones. He delayed as long as he possibly could, until sweat broke out on his forehead and he knew there was no more time for delay. With one powerful thrust he climaxed and let his seed spurt into her warm body.

He was completely breathless and they both lay in panting silence for a while. He didn't know what to say. He'd not been as much in control as he'd planned. Still he'd found blissful release.

But what had she found?

He would ask her when he rounded up the courage and got a little breath back.

She raised both her hands and kneaded them through his hair, while she kissed him with incredible sweetness.

“Alec, toward the end I experienced a most wonderful feeling. Really amazing. I think my body was beginning to know this is delightful. Can we do it again so I’m sure?”

Alec threw back his head and laughed in joyous relief.

He hugged her to him so closely she pushed at him a little. “You’re a strong, virile man, Alec. I’m going to like learning to be a good lover, if you don’t squeeze me to pieces first.”

“Give me a little time, my beautiful witch. I’ll be more than happy to give you another lesson.”

She began to play with the hairs on his chest, amazed at how quickly that most fascinating part of his body began to swell against her. Of course nursing had made her familiar with a man’s body, but looking at men in a hospital had given her no idea of how much a man’s phallus could enlarge. Really astounding. Books didn’t begin to do justice to the wonder of a male.

If the pressure against her stomach didn’t alert her, the red aura ringing him did. She suspected Alec was unusually passionate. What amazing control he must possess to submerge his desires so rigidly. He was a man who would always strive to be in charge of his body. How had he maintained control the long time while she’d been ill and he’d been with her almost hourly? The thought of such selfless love was daunting.

She ran her fingers over his corded chest. This time she watched him watching her. She knew when his mouth curved into his beautiful smile how he was pleased at her response to him. How could he not be? She felt as hot as a forest fire raging out of control. Knowing he wanted her so badly proved more devastating to her senses than any words he might say. She grabbed at him and sensuously slipped her hands up and down his strong body. Caressing a man felt so wonderful, she’d really had no idea. Men were simply gorgeous creatures.

He was going too slowly. She swept her tongue into his mouth and explored him as thoroughly as he’d just done her. She could taste a little mint and a little lemon and a great deal of Alec’s own intoxicating flavor.

He groaned and began to kiss her whole body, starting at her breasts and working his way downward. Slowly. Too slowly. He was far too controlled. She could feel his hardness, his rock hardness and she knew he was holding back in mistaken unselfishness. As he’d done the last time.

This time was very different for her. She really wanted to get to the phase when she’d started to feel an unexpected pleasure, as colors mounted in her mind. Now his hard, muscled body and scorching heat were more exciting than she’d ever dreamed.

Knowing he wanted her so intensely made her wild in a way she’d never imagined. A bone-deep desire for all he could do to her, all he could teach her. There was so much to learn, but only from him. Only ever from him.

She'd have to do something to speed him up.

She ran her fingers over his chest and then fastened her lips on one of his nipples. He jolted, tried to push her away and then with a groan subsided beneath her loving assault. She tasted him at will, until he gave a sound halfway between a groan and a laugh.

"Love, you're killing me. Leave off or I can't hold back."

"I don't want you to hold back, Alec."

His look was so startled as to be comical, if she'd felt like laughing.

"Vivie," he groaned and began to caress her mound, finally concentrating on her entrance. He inserted two fingers in her, using his thumb to caress the little button she'd not suspected could hold so much pleasure. He quickly drove her into clutching him and begging him to enter her.

He immediately obliged and to her delight the pleasure she'd hoped for was there. Ready and radiating. She shut her eyes and behind her lids she could see his aura shifting into a gorgeous rainbow of lovely colors, like nothing she'd ever imagined. She caught her breath at the beauty cascading through her senses in vivid waves. New images of wondrous glory she'd never imagined. But then, she'd never before pleased and been pleased by her lover.

This time the blazing delight was magnified untold times over the last. As he drove into her again and again, she enthusiastically helped by spreading her legs even wider and wrapping them around his waist.

Fierce pleasure shot through her as she accepted his love and gave him her own. Colors swirled around her as she trembled in every fiber of her being. She knew, knew for certain, she was responding to him with passion equal to his.

He surged into her and she lost any desire to talk for a long blissful time. Afterward, when they'd resurfaced on Earth, they lay grinning at each other.

"My fears were stupid, weren't they?"

He kissed her hair and answered as if still in a dazed dream.

"Not stupid. But thank God, groundless. You are a woman filled with untapped passion, Vivie. Our marriage will be truly wonderful."

"My very fear doubtless made everything worse. The mind and body are so closely linked. And I was so frightened, all for nothing." She reached up and stroked his face. "You brought me a gorgeous rainbow of delight, Alec."

He didn't know exactly what her words meant, but he knew they were filled with love. She kissed him and then rolled over in delicious exhaustion, snuggling her bottom sweetly against him. They both slept, spoon fashion as lovers through time have slept.

If anyone could have invaded their privacy, which one was smiling the most would have been difficult to discern.

* * * * *

They both woke early, as Vivie's office had no window shades, only cheerful and lacy curtains. Alec woke first, feeling his Druid's delightfully rounded rear against him. His body immediately reacted. He tried to scoot away from her, but when she felt his arms pulling from her she snatched them with her hands and held him fast.

"Well, sir, are you already tired of me?" Vivie asked with a laugh, turning in his arms to kiss him.

"Alec?" she said as he pulled his body away and got to his feet.

He laughed as she lay looking up in his eyes in puzzlement. Taking her hand, he placed it on his erection.

"We males can seldom hide our desire, love. I want badly to bed you again and it just won't do. The staff will be coming in soon."

She blushed violently, but looked at him with such craving he almost jumped on the bed again. To hell with the staff.

"I don't mind. We can lock the door."

Her voice vibrated with sultry longing and he leaned over and kissed her nose.

"You might not realize it, but you were getting a little noisy there at the end last night. I also will not take any more chances of getting you pregnant before we marry. I already feel negligent. I definitely do not want to disappoint your wonderful family. It's only two weeks, after all."

Even as he spoke he thought it was going to be the longest two weeks in the history of lovers. Having tasted Vivie's passion he wanted nothing more than to have her every night in his bed. As well as every morning.

It was a good thing she was moving to her grandmother Katherine's house. He'd probably attack her nightly if she didn't.

He leaned over and kissed her again, this time on her lips with the longing he knew he couldn't appease.

"But save your wonderful nightgown. I'm quite fond of what little I saw of it."

He whispered with a wicked lust and she promptly hit him with a pillow. Then she sat up in bed and watched him dress, her eyes following his every move until he laughed and left the room to shave.

He was one of the luckiest men on earth. Not only had he secured the love of his darling Druid, but she seemed to admire him for his struggles.

They'd weathered so much and he couldn't imagine being happier. They would be married in two weeks and those two weeks had better pass swiftly. He walked down the hall, whistling as he went.

How happy could one human be?

Chapter Thirty

His whistling increased in gaiety as he headed to the kitchen. His beard was too black and tough to tackle without warm water.

As he neared the front door of the clinic he heard a loud banging. A little puzzled since the clinic hadn't opened yet, Alec unbolted the door.

A burly man stood there with an offensive sneer on his face. As tall as Alec, but larger boned and more than a little flabby. Although his beard was trimmed it still concealed much of his face. Alec disliked him on sight.

"Well, son, don't you know your old pa?"

Alec first tried to mask his instinctive recoil and then threw back his head. This was the man who'd deserted him and his mother. There'd been no word from him since his last loving letter enclosing some money. When Alec was all of nine years old.

"No, I certainly don't," he said, his voice as frosty as he felt. "But come in. I think I might have a few questions to ask."

The man's expression never changed. "I expect so but I'll soon convince you. After all, why else would I be here?"

He walked in and Alec shut the door after him. "I wouldn't have the faintest idea. Are you perhaps down on your luck and want a handout?"

The man threw back his head and laughed. "My, my, how impolite. How can you treat your old father so?"

There was a pleasure underneath his words quite baffling to Alec. He saw nothing about the man to remind him of the father of his dreams. But perhaps he shouldn't be surprised after twenty years.

Even his voice twanged with a sound both alien and offensive to Alec's ears. The fact he was finally here mattered little to Alec. He'd always consoled himself with the idea something unavoidable kept his father from returning home. He'd have been more content never to see him and to wonder what happened, than to have his illusions of a gentle and loving man shattered.

"Suppose we go into my office, sir and continue our discussion."

The burly man's grin grew triumphant.

"Not the most loving welcome from my son, is it? But then you have some right for suspicions. I can answer them all, son."

Alec motioned him to follow and then led the way to the office across the hall from Vivie's. Actually it had been Stephen's, but Alec naturally appropriated it when Stephen left. He ushered his father in and closed the door behind him.

His heart quavered as he eyed the boorish man.

"Now, sir, shall we get down to business? I have no love for you. You abandoned my mother and me to poverty and I will not forgive you unless you have a very good reason. But first, what is my mother's maiden name?"

Mr. Stratton, if that was indeed his true name, sneered and then laughed.

"Too easy, son. Forbes. And if you want to be this obvious, I also know the date your mother and I were married and how we became engaged and when. If you want to keep questioning me I can answer anything you want to ask. As your father of course I'll know all the answers."

He put his head back and guffawed.

"Oh and I also have the good luck silver dollar your dear mother gave me before I left."

Still Alec could not believe this oaf was anything but a crude imposter.

"One more question then. What did you whisper to me, the last thing you said to me before you left my mother and me?"

Alec was only four at the time, but he never forgot his father taking him in his arms. Holding him tightly at first, then setting him at arm's length and smoothing the dark hair from his little boy's forehead.

"Always remember I love you, Alec. You are the son of my heart."

Those words were ones only he and his father would know. Words he'd treasured all his life. His father would not have told them to anyone else. If this man knew them, then in spite of his deep antipathy he had to be his father.

The man smirked.

"That's easy, too. To take care of your blessed mother, of course."

Alec said not a word, although he lowered his head to hide his relief. The man was an imposter. But how to prove it? He let the silence stretch on as he wondered what to do.

After looking at Alec sharply the crude man spoke again.

"When do I get to meet your blushing bride, son? I certainly want to know her before I go to the wedding. I understand the Duke and Duchess of Lambden insist their darling granddaughter be married from their home. I'm certainly looking forward to meeting them."

Alec made no attempt to conceal his disgust. Then he went out to the door to find Vivie.

* * * * *

Vivie pulled back her hair to tuck under her nurse's cap just as Alec burst in. She turned to him with a smile, ready for another good-morning kiss, when she saw the look on his face.

Kissing was not on his mind right now. She went up to him and took his lapels in her hands.

"Alec. What is it? Something has upset you dreadfully."

He grabbed her in both arms and held her so tightly she could scarcely breathe.

"Oh God, Vivie." He buried his face in her hair.

"Alec, you're frightening me. What is it, my dear one?"

He tried to speak and then gave an abortive gulp. "Thank God, or your Goddess, I told you about my background. There's a scruffy fellow out there who claims he's my father."

"And you don't believe him."

"No, I don't. Not for an instant. For one thing, my father had the same slim build I have. This man is bigger and more common-looking. Oh lord, I sound conceited. But he is common-looking. My father, no matter how twenty years treated him, would never look common. I don't know why he deserted my mother and me, but he always had the aspect of a gentleman. Nor would he come panting to be at our wedding so he could meet a Duke and Duchess."

"Ugh. I believe you implicitly. No father of yours could be so vulgar."

"But suppose I'm wrong? Suppose I'm merely idealizing a man I haven't seen for over twenty years? People change so much. I could be wrong. No, I can't be. He doesn't know anything vital about my father when I was young."

Alec held her to him tightly and then stepped away.

"I don't know what to do, Vivie. He's capable of making such a scandal all your relatives will be disgusted with me."

Vivie straightened and took off her cap, shaking out her hair and fluffing it so she looked more like a Duke's granddaughter than a nurse. Then she elevated her nose and turned to Alec.

"Take me to him, Alec. I would make his acquaintance."

"Heaven help him," said Alec, with a slight grin as he stepped ahead of her and opened the door.

Vivie went marching out to the corridor where Alec left the man. She walked up to him with a smile and her hand outstretched. Alec held back, hiding his surprise. His Druid's mind must have some original plan in mind. He'd watch with pleasure.

"Mr. Stratton? How very nice to meet you."

"Call me Ty, little lady. My, aren't you the purtiest thing I've seen in England."

Alec wanted to slap the leer off his face, but kept his peace. He'd wait and see what Vivie was up to.

"Then you haven't been here long, have you? England is full of beautiful women."

Her tone was positively flirtatious and Alec stared at her.

Ty's leer grew more marked.

“Been here a full week, ma’am. Wanted to get my bearings a little before coming to see my dear son. If I’d known how beautiful his bride was I’d have come sooner.”

Vivie smiled at him as if he were the most pleasing sight in her world.

“You aren’t quite what I expected, sir. You don’t much resemble my Alec. My, but you’re big and brawny, aren’t you?”

If Alec hadn’t been positive she had something in her devious Druid mind he’d have picked her up and carried her off to safety. Flirting with this character left her open to more trouble than he cared to contemplate.

“Guess I am, little lady. Years of working in the silver mines can build up a man, you know.” He flexed his muscles and stretched, doubtless thinking his flabby body appealing.

“And now I’ve met you I wish I’d known Alec’s mother. Do you happen to have a picture of her with you?”

Ty’s smile turned triumphant. Evidently he welcomed this particular question. “Sure do, little lady and it shows Alec as a boy. Wouldn’t you just like to see it?”

He pulled a battered photograph from his pocket and handed it to her, contriving to let his fingers touch hers. Alec hoped the man couldn’t see her slight flinch and took the photograph from her. A very small boy stood beside a lovely woman. They were both slight and both looking at each other with love. His throat filled with a lump making it difficult to talk or swallow. He’d give anything to keep the picture for himself and out of the hands of this lout.

He said nothing, but handed the photo back to Vivie.

“Oh, isn’t this precious?” She gushed and kept it in her hand. “I would so love to have a copy. Could I borrow it to have one made?”

Ty’s eyes narrowed. “Don’t think so, little lady. It’s all I’ve got of my precious Winnie. I’ll see to it you get a copy, though, for your wedding present.”

Vivie beamed at him. “How lovely. Please do it soon, though, as you know how frantic things get before a wedding and I don’t want you to forget. Isn’t Alec just noble looking, even as a boy? ‘How hard it is to hide the sparks of nature.’”

Suddenly Alec understood. Vivie was away out in front of him yet again. He’d told her once how his father only possessed a few books and one of them was Shakespeare. How he’d read to Alec every night, even when he was an infant and how they’d covered all the plays several times. Vivie had just quoted from *Cymbeline* and Ty only looked puzzled. Alec’s doubts were completely resolved. This man was an imposter.

The lump disappeared and in its place rushed a black rage, settling over him and marring his vision. As he started to move Vivie gave one look at him and grabbed his sleeve.

“Do make yourself comfortable, Mr. Stratton. Alec and I have a few duties to take care of here at the clinic.”

Vivie grabbed Alec's hand and dragged him out of the hall, marching to her office and shutting the door with a slam.

She grabbed him and kissed him thoroughly. His dark look lightened as she put her hands in his hair and drew him down for one more triumphant kiss.

"You're right, Alec. He's not your father. I only dipped into his mind to plainly see he's conniving for his own ends and he's unscrupulous. In no way could I believe him once I saw him, but now we both know for sure."

Alec looked at her with admiration.

"Not only did you trick him smartly with the quote from Shakespeare, but he made another bad slip. My mother's name was Winifred, but he never called her Winnie. He called her Freddy. Now let go of me, Vivie, I need some exercise."

He tried to shake her off but she held him tightly.

"Alec, no. Trouncing him will solve nothing. He's a slimy character. We need to get rid of him, not send him to the newspapers with a story of how his son beat him up."

Alec pulled her hands from his lapels and sat down in the nearest chair.

"You're right. Oh God. That's exactly what I'd like to do and exactly what he'd do if I trounced him. He wants money and influence and he thinks I can get him both. Smearing my name would be just what he'd like. He'd probably command a good fee for his story since we're about to be married from the home of the Duke and Duchess of Lambden."

He buried his face in his hands. "My god, Vivie, what have I done to you?"

She knelt beside him in an instant. "You've done nothing, dear heart. Nothing but love me and bring me untold joy."

He threw his arms around her and held her tightly to him.

"How did I ever manage to make you love me?"

"Well," she drawled out. "It might be your handsome face, or your thoroughly gorgeous body, or it might just be we were destined to be together. Druids believe most events are meant to be. You and I could be one of those remarkable events."

Alec got to his feet and pulled her up to him, cradling her hips against him, rotating his pelvis so she couldn't miss his steely arousal.

"Just so you know the power you have over me, Vivie. You have only to be in the same room and I want to take you on the floor, if necessary. Dear heaven, I don't know how I'll hold out until the wedding ceremony. I'd like to throw you down on your bed right now. To hell with the fact your staff will soon be calling for you."

Vivie's smile would have lit up the moon.

"I don't care about my staff, but I want to get rid of the shadow this imposter has thrown over us. Alec, I would like to call in my father."

"No." Alec's response was instinctive. "No. I will not involve your family in my regrettable past. No matter how you state it, I'm still a child from the poorest section of

Boston. My father virtually memorized Shakespeare and my mother lived by the highest moral standards. Still she took in sewing for a living. I do not want our poverty revealed."

Vivie reared back from him and then moved away. "I'm disappointed in you, Alec. You're a worse snob than you accuse my parents of being."

Alec dropped his hands which had been about to reach for her again.

"Vivie, you don't make sense."

She tossed her head of gorgeous auburn hair. "I do to me. You refuse to see anything other than you were poor. You won't admit your mother's care for you was extraordinary and you used your brilliant wits to achieve success. You don't really know why your father never came back. I think this imposter might know and I'd like to turn my father loose on him and see what he can find."

Alec abruptly sat down again.

"Vivie, if I thought there was the faintest chance of finding out more about my father, I wouldn't care if everybody in the world knew about my origins. And I think I'd be more honest to tell your parents of my past. You're right. I agree."

He sighed deeply and then looked her straight in the eyes.

"Let's call in Lord Lance."

Lord Lance, now an esteemed member of the British government and once the head of the Criminal Investigation Department of the Metropolitan Police of London. Doubtless the best man in Britain to consult, but one Alec hated to ask for help on such a shameful matter as the varmint claiming to be his father.

Chapter Thirty-One

Alec and Vivie requested an audience with Lord Lance and Morgan immediately announced she would be participating. Alec rather suspected that was exactly what Vivie desired, so said nothing. He tried to put aside his feelings of embarrassment for his lowly background. The overriding imperative was to smoke out the man pretending to be his father.

They went to the Dellafield townhouse. Vivie and her parents embraced, while Alec stood to one side. Lord Lance, looking at his women, raised one eyebrow at Alec and came around his desk to shake his hand.

"We are soon to be bound by the closest of family ties, Alec. Don't stand on ceremony with any of us. We welcome you, you know."

Alec took a deep breath. "That is exactly why we're here, my lord. Something's come up and we need help. I most of all don't want to embarrass the Duke and Duchess. If necessary, I'll withdraw my suit for Vivie's hand. I will not be a source of shame to any of you."

Vivie gasped. "Alec, you talk as if you're ready to break our engagement!"

He took her hand in his tight clasp even as he spoke to them all. "But that's exactly what I mean, love. I'll not bring disgrace on you and your family."

Morgan shot a guarded glance at her husband. "I think you'd better fill us in, Alec. This sounds serious."

"It is, Lady Lance. A man purporting to be my father showed up yesterday. I know he isn't but I don't know how to stop him from embarrassing us all. He's a bounder and a braggart and he won't hesitate to go to the most sensational of the press if it serves his purpose."

He hadn't even realized his statement allied himself with the rest of the family as he went on to tell the story of the man who said he was Tyler Stratton.

"I'm positive he's not my father. My father knew Shakespeare's works backward and forward and Vivie cleverly tricked him with a quotation he showed no sign of recognizing. He got my mother's nickname wrong, oh, there's so many things showing he's false. Not the least of which is Vivie's conviction of his deceitful nature. But if we thwart him he'll go to the papers complaining about the ungrateful son who refuses to allow him to meet the Duke and Duchess. That's a disaster I won't permit."

Lance got up and looked out the window.

"How long has he been in this country? Do you know?"

"A week, Papa," answered Vivie.

Lord Lance turned to face them, a smile on his face.

"Then it's easy. I'll get customs to look up all Americans entering about that time. He probably came in under his own name, as it would be hard to get papers otherwise. We'll soon have him."

Alec covered his face for the merest second. "Thank you, sir." He got to his feet and went to stand in front of Lady Lance.

"One other matter. I want very much to tell you both of my childhood. Vivie already knows and doesn't mind. Still, you might take it for granted that because I'm a doctor I come from a privileged family. I want you to know the truth. I will not join your family under false pretenses of any kind."

"Alec!" Vivie hurried to him and grabbed his sleeve. "My parents trust my judgment and don't care about the details of your childhood. It simply doesn't matter."

Alec covered her hand on his arm with his and held her tight. He smiled down at her, letting all his love for her be an open display.

"It matters to me, my love. If your parents are forced to defend me, I want them to know whom they're defending."

He put his hands behind his back and faced them squarely.

Lord and Lady Lance listened in fascination as Alec sketched his years in Boston, his successful gambling and his struggle to earn money to attend college and medical school. He didn't spare himself in any respect. He wanted these precious people to know him and understand his temptations and his struggles. He stated he'd never been required to cheat, although he didn't know what he'd have done had it ever been necessary. That although he'd never been in trouble while growing up in the slums it was hardly to his credit. There was no time for anything but gambling and school. He ended by stating he felt it might be best if he disappeared for a while. He definitely didn't want to embarrass them all.

When he was finished he looked Lord Lance in the eye and saw no sign of any reaction. The man was a master politician after all, adept at controlling his emotions. Lady Lance was more transparent.

"Dear Goddess of us all," she said. "What a fascinating story."

She walked over and kissed Alec's cheek and then turned to Vivie.

"No wonder you love him so much, darling. He's an exceptional man. But of course you must be married as scheduled."

Lance was suddenly at his side shaking his hand. "You are now doubly welcome to the family, Alec. Thank you for telling us when it truly wasn't necessary. That must have been difficult for you. I'll be proud to have you as a son-in-law. Your achievements are all the more impressive because of your struggles."

His handsome face lightened with a sudden grin. "Although I don't think I'd care to play poker with you, Alec. Tell me, do you automatically memorize cards as they're played, or is it a conscious chore?"

Alec grinned for the first time in the long meeting.

"It's almost automatic, but I still have to concentrate. So it's somewhere in between. It's a gift for which I can claim no credit. And I didn't always win, you know. But it was profitable enough I could make my mother comfortable for her last years."

"Amazing," Lord Lance murmured. "Someday I think I want to play cards with you after all. It's sure to be intriguing, even if you win every hand."

His grin swept over them all.

"But not for money, Alec."

Alec laughed in genuine amusement as they all joined him.

"Done, sir. You can even cut the cards."

Chapter Thirty-Two

Three days before the wedding saw no results from Lance's inquiry into the man who called himself Tyler Stratton. Alec retreated more and more into himself as anxiety ate into his soul. Periodically he'd remember Lord Lance' calm certainty his inquiry would be successful. Then his mind cringed at image of the imposter's coarse visage. His soul recoiled from the thought of this crude impersonation of a father showing up at the elegant home of the Duke and Duchess. And his heart would almost stop. Surely it would be better to postpone the wedding.

Only the hope he might soon be able to hold his darling Druid at any time pleasing to them both kept him from despair. He couldn't bear to even talk to his so-called father and finally refused to do so.

The imposter spent most of his time at the clinic, distressing the nurses in any way he could and trying to get Alec to acknowledge him in some way.

"You've got what you want, damn you," Alec finally shouted at him. "Now leave me alone."

He'd stalked off and shut himself in his office at the clinic. Only Vivie was allowed entry. Alec alternated between deep joy and inconsolable distress. Vivie was more calm than Alec and her confidence in her father never wavered.

The wedding was to take place in the small chapel on the grounds of the ducal estate. Due to Vivie's recent illness only family had been invited. The Lambden chauffeur was driving them to Dover after the wedding and Alec had booked a luxurious but small hotel Lord Lance recommended. They'd go by ferry to Calais and spend three weeks savoring Normandy.

When he'd made the plans he'd had one thought in mind. A secluded spot where he could make Vivie his own any time of night or day. Where they could breakfast alone before he took her to bed yet again. He'd booked private inns where they wouldn't have to stir from the room. The friend who'd advised him assured him the beds were big and as soft as only the best of French beds could be. He got himself through these last days imagining he was toppling Vivie into the cushiony folds of a bed just before he covered her body with his.

They'd walk and eat wonderful food and then make love again. He couldn't bear to think of giving up this enchantment. Yet he would not mortify the Dellafields with his so-called father.

Vivie never faltered in her certainty she would soon be with Alec forever.

Alec agonized over the possible cancellation of all his dreams and plans.

* * * * *

The day before the wedding dawned and Alec was in his office at the clinic. His head was in his hands, as he pondered the best course. Postponing the wedding seemed the only solution, although he wondered if Vivie would ever forgive him for such a horrible embarrassment. Even her love could hardly stand the shame of a last-minute cancellation. A cancellation so last-minute the papers would eagerly seize and one his so-called father would embellish.

Could he ever forgive himself if he lost her?

Vivie opened the door quietly and came to stand behind and cradle his head against her body. She'd regained most of her Druid glide and he half-smiled as she smoothly walked toward him.

"Alec, my love. Don't fret so. If your father is as obnoxious as we suspect, no one will take him up and his presence will be temporary. By the time we return from our honeymoon my father will have discredited him and everybody will know he's a fake."

He tipped his head back so it rested against her as he breathed a weary sigh.

"They'll also know I'm no fit match for a Duke's granddaughter."

"Alec, I could shake you silly. If my parents and I don't care about a malicious man spreading rumors, why should you?"

He grabbed her hands and kissed them. "Because not all of it's a rumor. In America being a self-made man is honorable. Here it's really not."

"The world is changing fast, Alec."

He only smiled, a sad smile. "Not that fast, Vivie. Not when it comes to British aristocracy."

"Alec, it doesn't matter. Not to me or my family. Why can't I convince you of this?"

Alec stood and took her in his arms. "Vivie, no matter what happens, please know, really know, no one will ever love you more than I do. Ever. Not through all the eons of endless time."

She cuddled up to him and sighed. "I'm beginning to suspect that, sir. I no longer have any doubt of your love."

"Nor I of yours," he whispered as he claimed her lips in a kiss that was both passionate and gentle.

They stood quietly for a moment, in each other's arms where they both knew they were meant to be. Vivie finally stirred a little and laid her head on his shoulder.

"I'm a little worried Kate isn't here yet. Not much, as I have no sense anything is wrong. Still I wish we'd hear from her. It's not like her to be so late."

Alec started to turn her face up to his again when the door was suddenly flung open and Ty stood there, weaving a little on his feet and smirking.

“Well, so here’s where you two lovebirds hide out.” His leer was as lewd as the crude way his eyes raked Vivie. “Haven’t decided to anticipate the wedding ceremony have you?”

Alec’s face darkened. “You’ve been drinking.”

“Course I have. At least England doesn’t have Prohibition like the stupid States. A man could really learn to like a country where liquor’s available. I just might settle down near to my beloved son.” He leered at them both. “What are you two doing behind closed doors? Not that I’d blame you, Alec. She’s a tasty piece. In fact I think I’ll claim my kiss from the bride right now.”

He started to move toward them and Alec exploded from Vivie’s clutch, catching Ty cleanly on the chin with a fast right fist. Ty went down, but not out and lay there glaring for a moment at his supposed son.

He began to struggle to his feet and Alec stood ready to floor him again. Alec was white to the roots of his hair, his eyes glaring with a fury Vivie hadn’t known he possessed. Ty seemed to fumble getting upright, then suddenly lurched up, a knife in his hand. He slashed furiously at Alec, all signs of drunkenness gone.

“You damned bastard, I’ll kiss who I please. Now stand aside while your father shows you how to please a woman.”

The lout was larger than Alec and bulkier, but he was also out of shape, as well as not entirely sober. Alec thanked Vivie’s goddess he’d kept fit, seldom missing his appointments at his sports club. He’d maintained his schedule as insurance that he could keep his strength during long operations. He’d never thought to be glad he was fit enough to floor an older man.

Ty rushed him, knife flashing and Alec grabbed his arm and twisted it behind his back. The knife cut Alec, ripping through his sleeve and into his flesh before he forced Ty to drop it.

Alec kept up the pressure on Ty’s arm until he screamed and at the sound the door flew open again.

Lord Lance strode in, followed by two officers of the law.

“A little late, I see. Take him away, officers, I’ll press charges shortly.”

The string of curses from Ty made Vivie’s eyes open wide, until Alec stepped up and thumped his chin again.

“Shut your wicked mouth unless you want me to totally work you over.”

Still the man raved. “Wait ’til I tell the newspapers how I’ve been treated. Beaten by my own son, just to keep me from attending his fancy wedding.”

If possible Alec seemed even paler.

“Pay no attention, Alec,” said Lord Lance. “This man is not your father, as you well knew. His name is Ralph Filer. He’s wanted in Nevada for quite a few misdeeds and we think he killed your father when you were ten to get his share of a silver mine. Nevada doesn’t look kindly on villains of such a sinister stripe. You won’t see him again.”

Filer seemed to shrink as Lance talked and was now sober and understanding he was deep in trouble. He made a half-hearted attempt to wrest free to come at Alec again, but the officers held him.

"You're just like your damned father, Stratton. Think you're better than anybody, don't you?"

Vivie walked up to him and punched him in the stomach with one small, rigid fist. As hard as she could.

"Alec has every reason to think so, but he doesn't."

She turned to her father, who was watching her with fascination. "Sorry, Papa, he was coming around the desk after me when Alec hit him. I wanted to hit him, too. Right in his paunchy gut."

Lord Lance clenched his hands and turned to the officers. "You'd better get him out of here before I turn on him too. Oh and gag him if he makes another sound."

Vivie clutched her father's arm. "Wait, Papa. He's got a picture of Alec and his mother he doubtless stole from Alec's father. Could we have it before they take him away?"

One officer held the twisting Filer while the other rifled his pockets and handed Vivie the priceless photo. Lord Lance grabbed his daughter and held her, while Alec stood by in a semi-daze. His left arm was hanging straight down at his side and Vivie pushed away from her father and ran to Alec.

She kissed him as she handed him the photo, a kiss promising delights lasting far longer than the few moments of their marriage vows. Even though he fervently returned her kiss, he held her with only one arm. Surprised, she looked down and saw the wounded one.

"Alec! You're bleeding. Quite a lot. You're dripping all over the floor."

A new voice joined in as Lady Lance came in the room carrying a basin of water and a jar of salve along with other supplies in a basket.

"I thought I'd be needed, so I came along too," she said sweetly, taking a pair of scissors and slitting Alec's sleeve.

Vivie laughed, Alec looked puzzled and Lord Lance rolled his eyes toward the ceiling.

"You'll have to get used to this, Alec. Druid women know you're in trouble before you do. How bad is it, Morgan?"

"Not as bad as all that blood indicates." She kept working on his arm as she spoke, ending by applying a large bandage and tying it behind his neck. "He'll have to wear a sling to be married in tomorrow but it will be mostly for protection so he'll not be jostled. By then I'll think of a story that shows how brave he is. Give me time. I never lie, but I can omit some of the more unnecessary details."

Lady Lance smiled her smile, almost as glorious as Vivie's, patted Alec's arm and then his face. "I'm so glad you'll be part of our family, Alec. Your honor is impeccable. You're just the gentleman I want for Vivie."

She turned to Vivie. "You probably already know Kate and the rest of the family just arrived from Paris. They endured a bad channel crossing and a little delay but they're here. The whole family, including your brothers are here for the wedding. And Kate is bringing a surprise for you."

"I knew Kate was close." Vivie took a satisfied breath.

"Now we'll leave you two alone. Bring her home soon though, Alec. You both need to rest a little before tomorrow."

Alec wrapped his good arm around Vivie and beamed at his all-but parents-in-law. For the first time, he felt a true part of the Dellafields. They accepted and were proud of him for what he was, not what he pretended to be. The warmth of their approval washed over him in radiating waves of affection. And deep down inside he heard a melodious counterpoint to the song his heart was singing. His father had never deserted his wife and son. His father loved them both.

He suddenly sat down, pulling Vivie onto his lap.

"I want lots and lots of little Druids. Are you sure you're willing to cooperate on this?"

He held her tightly with his good arm.

"I don't suppose you'd like to get naked and start trying?" Her tone was half-teasing and he took the only possible action.

His kiss nearly scorched her toes.

"No, vixen. You need to get some rest, as your mother so carefully pointed out. Anyway, we have plenty of time. I welcome your Druid belief one lives age after age. I might never achieve the perfection you think possible, but with you I'm willing to try."

His voice dropped to a low, serious note.

"I'll be with you in every life we have. There is no eon where my love will not find you."

Her eyes filled with tears.

"I know. Our love is everlasting."

He kissed his darling Druid until she could barely breathe, then stood to raise her with his good hand. He held her for one ardent moment and then put her aside with a sultry smile.

"I can hardly wait to start making little Druids," he growled.

Tomorrow had better come soon.

About the Author

Jean was born in Ohio but has lived most of her life in southern California. Her insatiable love of reading started at age seven, when her widowed mother accepted a teaching job. For many of her formative years Jean was housebound in the afternoons until her mother returned from work. She happily spent untold hours reading everything and anything. This joy of reading has influenced her whole life, and is still one of her chief pleasures. Writing is equally enjoyable, and now takes top place in her favorite activities.

Her journalism degree was used only infrequently until recently. Marriage, two children and two grandchildren took priority. After some twenty years of being a real estate broker and having her own firm, Jean returned to her always beloved writing. Through the years she and her husband have enjoyed collecting art and minerals. Her husband now is of great assistance as an enthusiastic editor and a valuable critic.

She's a dedicated member of RWA and has won several awards in national contests. The Druid series are presently her main focus of literary interest, although she's also written four other historical romances. Romance has proven most satisfying to write, since her hero and heroine always manage to struggle through to a happy ending. Sometimes a secondary character takes over though and demands his own book!

And then we literally have another story!

Jean welcomes comments from readers. You can find her website and email address on her author bio page at www.cerridwenpress.com.

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