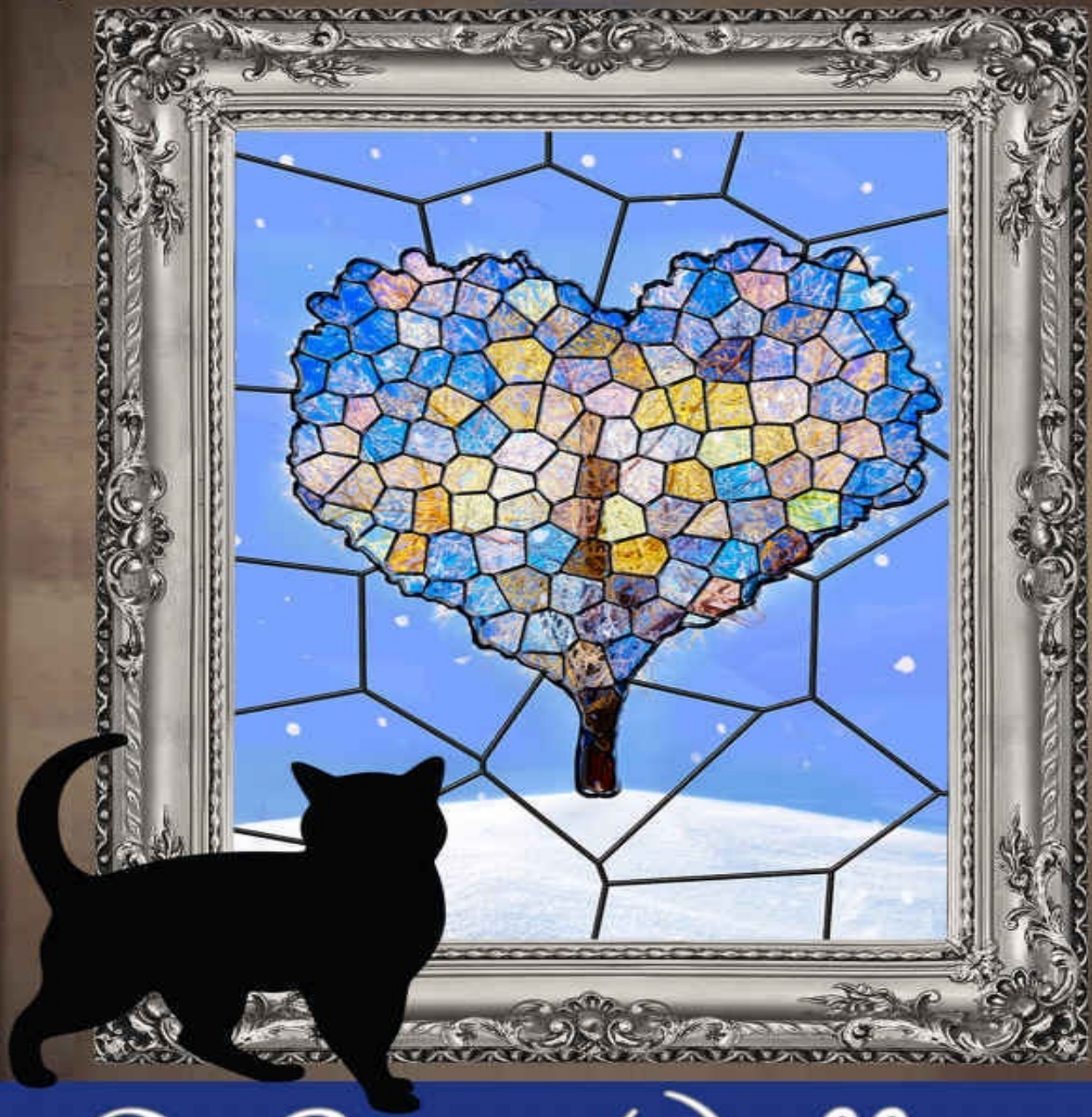


SHE SHALL HAVE MUSIC

Psychic Seasons: A Cozy Romantic Mystery Series



Regina Welling

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She Shall Have Music

By ReGina Welling

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Tender new grass spread out before her like a carpet as Amethyst curled bare toes into its lush green fullness. A sun-warmed breeze wafted through her hair, lifting strands dyed a delicate shade of lavender to send them floating around her face. She inhaled deeply letting the earthy scent of summer refresh her as the soothing sound of a waterfall lulled her senses.

Wait a minute. Waterfall? How did that get there? She remembered choosing a guided meditation that had her walking through sunlit fields. The sound of rushing water was completely unexpected and out of place.

Frowning at the distraction, Amethyst opened her eyes, abruptly coming out of the meditation and into the present with an oath. The waterfall noise was real and coming from the laundry room.

A quick dash into the kitchen revealed a growing puddle of water spreading out from under the laundry room door; she pulled it open with a sense of dread to find an absolute gusher cascading out the top of the machine. Lunging, the petite woman clad entirely in purple punched the button to kill the cycle and stop adding to the flood of sudsy water already swirling around her ankles.

Just what I need today—a disgusting mess, she thought, as a striped purple sock floated past. Amethyst watched the sock drift toward the floor drain under the laundry sink, then swirl around twice and sink below the layer of bubbles. And now she knew what had plugged up the drain. Next to the machine, a sodden pile of clothes, all in various shades of her signature color, humped above the water level looking like a purple mountain rising from the sea.

If the sea was made of dirty, soapy water, that is.

Blowing the hair out of her eyes in disgust she muttered to herself then waded across the room to pull the sock, its mate and two pairs of filmy—also purple—unmentionables out of the drain.

Immediately, the soapy deluge sluiced away leaving a slimy, slippery soap film on the floor.

In a state of total annoyance, Amethyst stomped into the kitchen, yanked open the broom closet door and grabbed the mop, a bucket, and a big sponge before stomping back to the laundry room.

She tried to ignore the baleful, green-eyed glare coming from the ball of ginger fur on the shelf behind the washer. Another thing she did not need today was recrimination from a fat cat. She shot him a narrow-eyed look in return.

“I’m cleaning it up, your majesty. No worries, you won’t have to get your hairy toes wet.” She wrinkled her nose at him. In response, he raised one hind leg and began to clean himself.

Most women would have called a repair service, but Amethyst was not most women. She prided herself on being resourceful—a real do-it-yourself type. It helped that she had a knack for understanding how mechanical things worked.

Simple logic told her whatever mechanism that triggered the machine to stop filling had failed—and that the first step was to empty the machine of water. Holding her breath, she manually selected the spin cycle to activate the pump.

It worked, the water level promptly lowered.

A quick calculation weighing the cost of a repair technician against the chance to see the inner workings of her washing machine was a no-brainer so she booted up her laptop for a quick Internet search and found a video that showed how to troubleshoot the water level workings.

It looked simple enough and all she needed was a screwdriver and a putty knife.

Undoing four screws to remove the control panel cover and check whether the clear vinyl pressure tube was firmly seated at the top was a breeze. Less than five minutes later, she had made visual confirmation—all good.

Back to the video and step two. Remove the front panel and check the other end of the tube.

Following instructions, she poked the putty knife into the seam and gave it a firm push to pop the first clip. With almost no resistance, that side of the front panel jolted loose. Humming to herself, she applied the tool to the second clip then lifted the entire panel right off the machine.

Just below the lip of the drum, the other end of the pressure tube appeared firmly and properly attached.

Step three—test the water level switch. That step required special tools she didn't own so she settled for doing a visual inspection.

Frugal and conscious of the environmental need to save water, Amethyst rarely ran a load at less than full capacity, which meant the switch usually stayed at the highest setting. Maybe it was just stuck.

To test theory, she twisted the knob. Sure enough, it turned stiffly but after moving it through each setting several times, the motion smoothed out.

Hoping she'd found the problem, Amethyst put everything back together and turned the machine on after setting it to the lowest water level. At least if it overflowed this time, she would be able to test before it could flood the room again.

What was that old saying about a watched pot never boiling? The same principle applied to watching a washing machine fill with water, it seemed to take forever.

When the water shut off at the proper level, she did a little happy dance and tested the next setting and finally the highest one. Each setting worked properly.

Sixty dollars saved by not calling a repair tech. Minimum. Not bad and all in time for today's appointment.

Her parents, both frugal by nature, had passed on the trait. Concern for the ecology of her planet helped her hone frugality into a skill.

Living in an underground house reduced her carbon footprint considerably since it required very little energy to heat and none at all to cool.

She'd bought the place for not much more than the cost of a good, used car. Quite a deal, really. It was a cozy home shared with Tommy the cat; an excellent roommate who kept the place mouse-free.

And even if he did occasionally lose his mind and chase a housefly up the curtains, he was a champion at cuddling.

What more could a woman want?

—,~'~',—

Dread slowed his footsteps as Reid Grayson made his way along a series of empty cubicles. Well past the end of the working day on a Friday afternoon, he knew that he and the CEO, who was also the owner of the business, would be virtually alone.

He paused to mentally roll up his sleeves before knocking on the door. The corner office was situated to allow its occupant a full view of the rest of the space. Floor to ceiling glass kept the office scrupulously clean signaled an open door policy.

Wishing the ordeal was already over; Reid scrubbed a hand across his face, rubbing tiredness from his eyes.

Months of agonizing had gone into this decision but this job was sucking the life out of him and he needed to move on.

Hearing the annoyance evident in the muffled, “Come in,” did nothing to change his mind. Six years was enough time spent in a job he hated.

Resolve sent a shot of steel up his spine and straightening his shoulders, Reid strode through the door to place a handwritten letter of resignation on his father’s desk. Lionel Grayson gave the paper a quick glance, balled it up, and tossed it in the trash before standing and leveling a steely-eyed gaze at his only son.

“No,” he said, gray eyes flashing aggressively, “I will not accept your resignation.” Lionel placed both hands on his desk and leaned forward to emphasize his displeasure. Wearing a perfectly cut and fitted Italian suit over a crisp white shirt and tie, his dark hair just graying at the temples, Lionel was the perfect picture of a successful executive. With customers, he projected a calm, almost comforting presence that led to trust and ultimately to sales.

With employees, he was stern but approachable. Fair. Unless said employee was his progeny and then he was rigid and inflexible.

In order to avoid any semblance of nepotism, Lionel treated his son and daughter differently than the rest; they were the ones who dealt with problem clients. Whatever the snafu, it would be turned over to one of his children to handle. Consequently, both worked long hours and rarely got more than a day’s vacation each year.

Reid never minded hard work; he loved the challenge of being given a problem to solve. However, the insurance business was not right for him, or he was not right for it; either way you wanted to look at it. He had no passion for the work and the constant pressure to find loopholes in order to avoid paying a claim went against his very nature.

When he had agreed to take this job, the knowledge that he would be helping people had been its only redeeming quality. If he had known he would spend six years trying to do the opposite, he would have done something—anything—different.

Instead, he had married young and wanted to provide for his wife, to have babies with her and support a family. Reid preferred to give Jane the opportunity to be a stay-at-home wife and mother that was what she wanted.

If his son found Lionel unyielding, it was only in two areas: work and Reid's aborted marriage. Lionel wanted—no—required his son to take over the company at some point and he had not approved of his daughter-in-law. Not one little bit. With her bizarre ways and penchant toward altruism, Lionel assumed she had been the one behind Reid's choice to take a job at a non-profit agency.

Lionel had used his connections to put a stop to that and to any other unsuitable job opportunity Reid belonged in the family business and left with essentially no other choice, had come to work with and be groomed by his father. Lionel thought his son had accepted his rightful place, but now he knew better.

“Nevertheless, I'm leaving at the end of the month.” Reid was adamant. Three years ago, he'd come home to find his wife gone. No note, no explanation, just the bleak, echoing emptiness she left behind in their small home. Not that he had really needed an explanation.

He knew exactly what had happened that day. She had left because he had asked her to betray herself, to deny one of the things that made her special to him and to become someone she never wanted to be. All for the sake of his job.

He missed her still.

With a sigh, he slumped in the slightly uncomfortable chair opposite his father's desk and let the misery wash over him. He hated this job and with no wife or family to provide for, his reasons for taking it no longer existed.

“Dad, I'm sorry. I would rather not fight with you over this but I can't do it anymore. I'm leaving the agency with or without your blessing.”

Lionel looked away. A mile wide stubborn streak made him want to force the issue—to prove he knew best—just as he thought he had when he brought Reid into the agency but he loved his son. Turning his gaze back, Lionel studied Reid, seeing his determination and admiring the younger man for standing up for himself, he capitulated.

Better to let Reid leave the company than to lose him forever.

Sighing he asked, “Who will run this place when I'm gone if you're not here? This was supposed to be my legacy.”

The answer to that one seemed blindingly obvious. “Why not groom Cassie for the position? She loves the company and more importantly, she wants it. Haven't you ever noticed?”

Caught up in the notion of leaving the company to his son, Lionel had missed all the signs that his daughter was the one with the ambition, the drive to take over. Knowing the company would stay in the family went a long way toward keeping the peace.

Waving a hand to indicate that Reid should leave, Lionel said. “Go. Never mind the months' notice. Take an extended vacation or something. I'll see that you get a generous severance package.”

Thankful this had gone better than expected, Reid grinned at his father who smiled back at him. “

she's still here, send your sister in on your way out. We'll see if she can sink or swim.”

Reid had no doubt Cassie would swim.

Even in shark-infested waters, he would trust his sister to come out on top.

Lighter in his heart than he'd been in years, Reid stepped around the desk to shake his father's hand, then pulled the older man into a hug before walking out the door before he changed his mind.

Everything that he had amassed in his office over the past six years fit into a smallish cardboard box: school trophies, sales plaques and his favorite stapler—so little to mark a life lived in this space. It surprised him to realize he would miss it a little—the familiar smell of coffee brewing in the break room, the sound of phones ringing, fax machines beeping, fingers tapping on keyboards.

An unexpected sense of nostalgia settled over him as he made his way toward the lobby. As much as he knew it was time to move on, there were people he would miss seeing every day. When he next walked through these doors, it would be as the owner's son, visiting his father, not as the future CEO.

That was a promise he made to himself—here and now. This chapter of his life was over. He was thankful Lionel had capitulated so easily but Reid was under no illusions that his father had an ulterior motive and fully expected to lure his son back into the fold at some future date.

Reid balanced the box in one hand while fishing out his car keys with the other. Once the box was stashed in his trunk, he slid into the leather seats of his only toy and gunning the engine, shot out of the parking lot.

The way he drove, it only took minutes to cover the distance between work and home while his mind raced through various possibilities. He could break out that box of video games he used to love and dive into it for a week or take the vacation his father had suggested. For the first time in his life, he was not required to be anywhere. The freedom intoxicated while it also overwhelmed.

Stepping through his front door, the emptiness on the other side slapped Reid in the face as it had every day for the past three years.

In a haze of young love, he had married his high school sweetheart only days after graduation. Even now, though, he refused to admit they had been too young. With what few resources they had, Jane had managed to make a nice home for them here and after she left, he'd stayed on—partly because he was too broken to leave and partly because he thought she might come back.

Looking around at the place, memories overlaid the emptiness and even though he knew how unhealthy it was to live with them, up until now, he could not contemplate leaving those bits of the past behind. After today, though—after leaving the company—he thought it might finally be time to move on completely. Start a new life in a new place.

The kitchen. He could still picture her there, cookbook open on the counter, steam—and sometimes smoke—wafting from the stove while she laughed at her own inability to learn how to cook.

Reid wondered where she was, what she looked like now, how she had changed.

As soon as he realized she was gone, he had begun a frantic search and found her twice. Both times after watching her from a distance, he had found himself unable to face her. The pain had been too raw.

Jane had made her choice to leave and now he had to live with it.

Half of a rented duplex, the single bedroom unit was small. Tiny, really. Lionel considered the

home disgracefully inadequate for a man in an executive position and had voiced that particular opinion at every opportunity. Nonetheless, Reid had stayed all this time. It was the last place he remembered being truly happy.

From his vantage point by the door, he could see the entire space. A single bedroom, galley kitchen, bathroom, and a seating area Jane had eagerly decorated with flea market finds.

It would probably take less than a whole day to pack everything up and move on. And he knew he should.

Instead, he put off making the decision and opened the refrigerator to see if there was anything there worth eating. Chinese takeout. Had that been from Tuesday or Wednesday? It passed the sniff test so he grabbed a fork and booted up his laptop, not even bothering to heat up the leftover food.

There were already emails from headhunters. Word traveled fast in the insurance business. Most of the offers were from rival companies; those he answered with a polite thanks-but-no-thanks letter. After just leaving what, for him, had been a soul-sucking position, taking another one just like it was not the plan.

An email from Cassie:

Thanks for being an idiot and getting out of my way. But seriously, I know this was your nightmare even if it's my dream come true. I'll make you proud, I promise.

Another from his friend Tyler:

Hey man, it's been awhile. I know you're busy but we should get together. I'll be in the city one day next week, or better yet, you could take some time off and come out to the lake for a visit. You could probably use the break and we have plenty of room.

Think about it.

Emails like these had been hitting his inbox regularly since Tyler had settled back into his hometown.

An option, maybe a good one. Take a week or so to just breathe before making any more life-altering decisions. Clear his head.

With no more deliberation, he fired off an answer:

You're right, it's been way too long and coincidentally, I have some free time starting now if that works for you. I know it's short notice but I could be there tomorrow.

Tyler's answer came back quickly.

Tomorrow, then. We'll be ready for you.

Okay—Reid thought—a little break and then I'll figure out where to go from here.

—.-'~'-.-,--

Tyler Kingsley was feeling that tingle he got when he was onto a good story. He had been friends with Reid Grayson since his first year with the paper. The two had met during Tyler's investigation

into insurance fraud. The story, one of his first assignments, had cemented his position with the paper and his friendship with Reid.

From that day to this, he had never known the man to take a week off. Something was up.

“Hey Jules,” he called out as he tracked her down in the library, “I invited my friend Reid for a visit and he’s somehow managed to clear his schedule.”

For about the hundredth time that day, he knew he loved her madly when she never batted an eye at his springing a friend on her without notice.

“How long is he staying?”

“A week. Where should we put him?”

“How about the room on the other side of your office? Once we dig out some furniture, it’s ready to go and he can use the adjoining bathroom since that’s already finished,” she teased, “If you think you can share it.”

That bathroom was the reason Tyler had chosen the suite as his office space. White subway tiles covering the floor and walls ended just above waist level with a border of round-topped black tiles above a thinner, inset border of brilliant turquoise. Above the brilliant white pedestal sink hung a spectacular art deco mirror framed in gleaming chrome and flanked by a pair of matching sconces. All three featured a sleek but angular eagle head motif. Black enameled cabinets were banded in chrome to match the towel bars but Tyler’s favorite thing in the room was the chandelier. Two levels of etched-glass globes rested in a complex series of bars attached to a set of fins that made him think of an airplane propeller. It was both cleanly sleek and ornate at the same time.

The art deco theme carried into the adjoining bedroom and the small sitting room on either side of the bath. Tyler had co-opted the sitting room for his workspace while the bedroom, with its separate entrance remained empty.

When Tyler’s fiancée Julie Hayward had inherited Hayward House from her grandmother, it had needed repairs—a new roof and windows just for a start—too expensive for her budget.

Parts of the house had been emptied and closed off to save heating costs until, spurred on by an incredible series of events, Julie and her friends had located two caches of family valuables hidden years before by her eccentric great grandfather. Now, the new roof was already finished and the windows were being installed at a steady pace to ensure everything would be buttoned up before winter.

Bit by bit, she and Tyler were cleaning and restoring long unused rooms.

While they picked through the two large storage areas for the appropriate furniture, Julie said, “Tell me about Reid.”

“He works for his dad’s insurance company. Huge family expectations, there. He was married but his wife left him and he doesn’t talk about it much. The situation really did a number on him and all he’ll say is how he screwed up the best thing in his life.”

“Sounds sad.” For a moment, she was quiet. “So do we tell him? I mean, what if Grams pops up unexpectedly. Or did you tell him already? After all, he’s going to be visiting what amounts to

haunted house.” Tyler smiled. Resident ghosts Estelle and Julius, Julie’s grandmother and grandfather, were not exactly high on the spooky scale once you got used to seeing them.

If you saw them at all. Not everyone could.

“I guess we’ll have to evaluate that situation if it arises. I can’t recall ever discussing our mutual belief or disbelief in the afterlife. That’s not the kind of thing that comes up in casual conversation.”

Julie finally located the bed frame with matching nightstands, dresser, and desk that went with the room. This particular furniture would have been among the first items sold next spring toward paying for the repairs on the roof. Now, instead, it would go back into the rooms where it belonged.

It was a sweaty bit of work to wrestle the larger pieces into place; even taken apart, the bed frame was heavy.

“Want me to clear out for the night? I could get together with the girls; tell them we’ve set the wedding date. After all, Christmas is only three months away. We have some planning to do if we are going to pull off a nice, intimate ceremony.”

“No, don’t leave. Invite them all here. I have a feeling it might do him good to be around the group.” The thought had come into his head and now Tyler was sure this was the case.

Estelle, who had violated her granddaughter’s privacy yet again, concentrated on doing two things at once—remaining unseen and using her ghostly wiles to subtly influence Tyler. She felt a little uneasy about planting that suggestion in his mind but it was necessary to move things forward as quickly as possible. Reid coming here was going to touch off some fireworks, might as well light the match sooner rather than later.

Convinced, Julie made calls to the three women she considered next best thing to sisters. If anyone could help her plan a wedding on short notice, they could.

“I see a little disturbance. Right here,” Amethyst reached into the tourist’s aura, plucked at the strands of light until they settled back into their proper pattern, then waited for the woman to release whatever emotion was tied to the blockage she had just removed.

“My son is driving me nuts. We probably overestimated the allure of autumn foliage for a teenager. All he does is text his friends, act crabby, and sigh; I’m at my wit’s end. We’re headed back home tomorrow after tomorrow and this has been the most enjoyable part of the entire trip for me.”

Amethyst smiled. This was an all too common problem. “If you don’t mind a short drive, I have a suggestion that might help. Rock Ridge just put in a zip line attraction. It’s not a super-fast ride but it is one of the longer ones and for a few extra dollars, they fit riders with a helmet camera. It’s popular with the teens because they get to keep the video they made. The wait can be a bit long on the weekends, but there are some perks. Decent shops and something called a Mini Spa where you can get a seated massage while you wait.”

“That sounds perfect. I hope you won’t take offense but when the owner of the RV Park recommended you, I thought he was completely bonkers. And when I got here, even though he had described your place and how you could not see it from the road, I was sure this was going to be a waste of time and money, but I can’t tell you how much better I feel.”

Situated on the lower end of a large lake, Oakville thrived with tourist activity throughout most months of the year. The summer months through autumn were busiest followed by a lull in early winter until the snowmobile, skiing, and ice fishing seasons kicked into full swing. Early spring was nearly dead until fishing season began.

Amethyst had chosen Oakville for several reasons. Mostly because the drive home was just under two hours and the town council, sensing a trend and attempting to emulate the success of places like Sedona, had done a bit of research and determined that the edge of the lake not only rested on the crossing of two ley lines, but was also home to a vortex. Once word got out, an increasing number of energy seekers found their way to the waterside village.

While Amethyst remained skeptical of energy vortexes—that was something she would have to see in order to believe—she also knew it would be foolish to argue against an increase in business that allowed her to make a living from her unique gift. Following on that success, she launched a series of recorded, guided meditations that she sold both online and locally. Steadily increasing sales created a nice second income.

With minimal living expenses, she was able to send money to her parents and still sock away a portion for savings. Surprised at how quickly it mounted up, she had a tidy sum stashed away already this year. Letting Julie rent the place out for fashion photo shoots only added to her nest egg.

Once the nice tourist had gone, and finished for the day, she still had time for a walk down by the water before meeting her friends at Julie’s house. This time, she vowed not to make any bets with Kat—well, any *more* bets with Kat. The one made when she had called to finalize arrangements for picking up the blind psychic on her way to Hayward House did not count.

Kat predicted Julie had invited them all over to announce her wedding plans and Amethyst was sure there was a new clue to the mystery of Julie's hidden family heirlooms. She stuffed a ten-dollar bill in her pocket just in case.

~.-'~'-.,_

Amethyst glanced at her watch. If she left now, she could get to Kat's house fifteen minutes early. It had been awhile so maybe it was time to ask for a Tarot reading. Walking up to the front door, she smiled as she always did when she saw the sign; Madame Zephyr, Kat's professional name and one passed down by her grandmother, did not suit her friend at all. It was such a whimsical sounding name for Kathleen whose practicality went bone-deep.

"No, there's nothing specifically wrong, I've just been feeling a little off color lately." Amethyst explained after asking for the favor.

"So what? Blue instead of purple?" Kat teased.

"Ha-ha. Though, I suppose that phrase coming from me does have some interesting connotations." Amethyst admitted. "You're sure you don't mind?"

"Of course not." Simply dressed in a sweater over a pair of jeans, her soft, dark hair loose around her face, psychic was not the first word to come to mind when one looked at Kat. Nevertheless, she was a gifted reader and medium.

Kat reached into the cabinet and pulled out a deck of Tarot cards that she rarely used, but this one seemed appropriate to the need. This particular deck provided deeper insight into the seeker's emotional state, which is what she thought Amethyst required today.

Unwrapping the deck from its cocoon of light blue silk, she handed the cards over to Amethyst and said, "Here, you know the drill. Shuffle them, then cut the deck with your left hand. Take as much time as you need."

When the deck was back in her hand, she laid out only five cards, face down in a simple cross pattern. Her movements were precise and habitual, ones she practiced so often she could do them in the perpetual darkness that had become her life. Kat was blind.

"The first card will define your attitude and emotions. The second will explain the reason for them. The third predicts future changes. The fourth shows the perceptions of others and the fifth card will tell what you are hiding from yourself. Are you sure you want to proceed?"

"Please—continue."

"Okay. This first card," Kat turned the card over and brushed her hand across it; her sensitive fingers reading the bumps of braille stamped along its edge as her eyes gazed blankly forward. "The Hermit, it's inverted. Normally it indicates a state where the person takes time alone to increase their energy; recharge their batteries. But, inverted it means the opposite; that you have been alone too long and too much solitude is draining your energy."

"Okay, I guess we're talking relationships here?" Between clients and time spent with friends, the word solitary was not the best one to describe her current lifestyle.

"Right, and with it being one of the major arcana cards, that means the feelings are more intense."

and you are at a pivot point for change. Then the next card is the Ace of Chalices which indicates a feeling of—you're not going to like this—but the best word is frailty.”

“I’m small—petite, even—I’m not frail.” Amethyst’s voice, deep for a woman of her slight stature, dripped with scorn. Kat shook her head.

“No, it’s not physical frailty but a state of defensiveness when it comes to admitting your feelings.”

Well, right now, she felt a bit like a bug on a pin, Amethyst shifted in her seat. This reading was hitting a bit too close.

With Julie and Tyler paired up nicely and Gustavia finding love—she could admit it—she felt left out and honestly, just a bit jealous. The one thing she most regretted about her failed marriage was the lack of closure she had allowed herself by walking away without warning. There had been no fighting, no tearful goodbye, no slamming of the door; just some papers in the mail and it was finished.

The third card Kat flipped over was the Nine of Wands. “Well, that’s an interesting card to have in this position. It signifies that in the future, you will lack protection; there will be a situation you cannot handle. At least by yourself, anyway. You will need to ask for help.”

Amethyst bristled at that. She preferred being independent, being the one who helped others, not the other way around.

A tiny smile flirted across Kat’s lips. She knew this was not a card Amethyst wanted to see.

The next position—the one that defined other people’s perceptions—yielded the Ten of Swords. At least it was a positive card. Sort of.

Kat breathed a sigh.

“Ten of Swords means others see you as a person who plans ahead and who is far-sighted and not balanced. In other words, if there is negative energy swirling around in your head over something; it’s coming from you and not from others.”

Her ears, their hearing sharpened from extra use, caught a faint hum of acceptance, but when Amethyst neglected to elaborate, Kat continued on to reveal the final card in the layout.

The Three of Pentacles. “And finally, the thing you choose not to see is your ability. Or, rather, your ability is the thing you undervalue most.”

Kat reached across the table and Amethyst knew the hand her friend proffered was a show of support rather than sympathy so she met that warm grasp with one of her own. The reading had given her a lot to think about. Then with a cheeky grin, Kat said something slightly shocking. “You’re not the only one who’s jealous of Julie and Gustavia.”

Had she said that out loud? Amethyst didn’t think she had, but maybe. Still, Kat was extremely intuitive so it was no stretch to think she might have picked up on those thoughts.

“I feel like such a jerk,” she admitted. “They both deserve every good thing life has to offer and I want those things for them. But, between you and me, it’s enough already.”

Kat agreed, “I’ve never been on a date in my life—and truth be told? I even envy your failed

marriage. Better to have loved and lost—or whatever the saying is—I agree with the sentiment.”

—,.-'~'-.,—

“Grams, are you there?” Julie called out. She knew her grandmother was most likely to be found or near the gazebo, so this was the first place she looked.

Used, by now, to the idea of speaking to ghosts, she didn’t even flinch when Estelle appeared right in front of her.

“I’m here, no need to shout.” Julie smiled at the admonition.

“Sorry. Listen, Tyler invited a friend of his to stay with us for a week. His name is Reid, and he’s due to arrive any minute. We haven’t decided if we should tell him about you, so please try not to freak him out.” Grams tended to pop into her former home unannounced. For the sake of privacy, Julie and Tyler had tried to set some boundaries and while Estelle was getting better at remembering and honoring their wishes, there were still occasional lapses.

“Should we work out some kind of signal in case I need to talk to you? I’m getting the hang of ringing the doorbell or I could have Julius teach me how to make the lights flicker.”

“If you think you can manage it, the lights would be best. And speaking of my great grandfather, could you pass the news on to him, please?”

“Of course.” Estelle appeared intrigued by the thought of having someone new in the house. “What was his name again? Do you know anything about his background?”

“His name is Reid Grayson and Tyler has known him for several years. Grams, you know Tyler wouldn’t invite anyone without being completely sure it was safe.”

“Reid Grayson?” Her eyes twinkled. “Well, that’s okay then.”

“Do you know Reid?” Julie tried to imagine how that could be possible.

“Not personally, but I know of him. He’s part of this. In fact, his coming here completes the circle.”

“What circle? You’ve never mentioned anything about a circle. I don’t understand.”

“I know and I’m sorry but...”

Julie interrupted waving her hand to indicate impatience, “Never mind; forget I asked. I should know the drill by now. You aren’t allowed to explain. Is it some ghostly code of conduct where you’re only able to give out just enough cryptic bits of information to be annoying? Or, did you develop a twisted sense of humor after you passed?”

“I am sorry, darling girl. Continue on with your wedding planning session, break the news that you’ve set the date and by the end of today, much will be clear.”

“How did you know? We only decided last night.”

“The ways of spirit are mysterious.” Again, that twinkle.

Julie snorted. “Mysterious? Please. You’re not fooling anyone; you were snooping again. We’ve

talked about this, Tyler and I need some semblance of privacy.”

An indignant Estelle replied, “I was not snooping. We are given certain bits of information, Julie and I, but only when the powers that be think we need to know.”

“I’m sorry.”

“And you’re forgiven. Now, I must go,” and with that, she faded from view.

Hoping to tell Tyler everything she had just learned, Julie turned and made her way back toward the house. She stepped onto the patio just as Lola streaked out of the woods and around the corner toward the front yard. That could only mean one thing; it was already too late, their guest had arrived. Curiosity had Julie hurrying to meet Reid.

Whoever invented GPS was an absolute genius. And best of all—not having to fold it back up when you arrived at your destination. When Reid made the first turn out of Oakville, he knew he would have been hopelessly lost without that smoothly competent voice emanating from his dashboard.

Proud of himself for only yelling at the device twice—he found it annoying to be told when not to turn—he whooped when he heard, “You have arrived.” Tyler had not been kidding when he had said “come to the country.”

Then he rounded the final curve and let out a low whistle. Hayward House had that effect on people.

Sprawling amid a manicured expanse of lawn, the structure was a study of contrasts, a delightful, somewhat eclectic mixture of styles. Classic Greek columns stood guard over the centrally located entrance while elaborately decorated Gothic wings complete with stained glass windows and steep peaked roofs flanked each side. Framed by blazes of autumn—fall had come late enough this year that for the end of the first week in November, there was still a lot of color--the gleaming white house stood under an impossibly blue sky.

Tyler had also not exaggerated when he had said they had plenty of room. My entire place would fit on that porch, he thought.

Reid grabbed his bag from the back seat and barely managed ten paces before a tawny blur rounded the left corner of the house. Lola was about to make first contact. He couldn't help but grin through his unease as she ran toward him at full tilt, her powerful hind legs nearly outrunning her front ones so that her gait was uneven, graceless. He thought she looked a bit like a cartoon character—half baboon, half giraffe, half dog—but there was nothing funny about the fact that he had nowhere to go.

Simple logic had him convinced there was no way the dog could stop in time so he closed his eyes and braced himself for the onslaught. If those teeth were anywhere near as big as they looked from a distance, he was in deep trouble.

Beads of sweat broke out on his forehead as he heard the pounding of feet getting closer and closer. Yet, unable to help himself, he opened one eye to see the dog veer and pass him before skidding to a stop several feet away. Brown, seemingly sad eyes, at odds with her relaxed body, lolling tongue and wagging stump of a tail, met his and he felt an overpowering urge to pat himself down—make sure all his parts were intact. Not the manliest of urges, so he resisted.

A sigh of relief slipped out. The dog was not a threat. Still, her head was bigger than his was so he thought it best to keep his distance—let her make the first move.

At that moment, Tyler opened the door, strolled across the porch, and pointed, “That’s Lola. She’s mostly harmless.”

“Mostly? How comforting.” He held out a hand and after shivering once. Lola took a sniff, then decided he passed muster and pressed herself against his leg as he scratched the velvety softness behind her ear.

Turning his attention back to Tyler, Reid said, “Nice place. A little subdued and understated for your tastes, I’m surprised you could settle for something so quaint,” he teased.

“Well, it was the only thing available in our price range,” Tyler joked. “Come inside and meet Julie. Her great grandfather was the one responsible for all this.”

“Ah, a visionary.”

“You have no idea.” Tyler smirked as though at a private joke and led Reid into the house.

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“Hey Jules,” Tyler called out as he heard the patio doors closing. He knew Julie had gone to the gazebo to look for Estelle. Getting the chance to know the grandmother who had raised his bride-to-be, even as a spirit was an experience to be thankful for but as much as he had come to love Estelle, the ghost had some serious boundary issues. Out of necessity, he had gotten used to her popping up at the most inopportune moments.

There was no doubt her motives were pure; Estelle loved her granddaughter and wanted nothing more than to see Julie happy before moving on to wherever it was that spirits go when their time on earth is done.

When Julie stepped around the corner, he caught her eye and with nothing more than an eloquent raised eyebrow asked if her mission had been successful. Her answer, a slight nod, went unnoticed by Reid.

“Julie, this is my friend Reid. Reid, my fiancée Julie.” Tyler introduced the pair with a smile.

“Welcome. It’s lovely to meet you.” Julie held out a hand and greeted Reid warmly as Tyler slid an arm around her shoulders.

Reid, seeing the love radiating between them, battled the jealousy that often arose when he spent time around happy couples. . Once, he had possessed that kind of love but no longer. He missed Jan. Everything about her—her sense of humor, her inability to cook, her warmth—had all been vital to his happiness.

Dragging his attention back to the present, he declined the offer of refreshment, instead opting to unpack his things.

“I’ll let Tyler show you around, he knows as much about the history of this place as I do.” Julie smiled ruefully. “I have some friends coming by in a little while; we have a lot planning to do. I’m sure Tyler will fill you in on that as well.” She reached for Reid’s hand again and squeezed it. “I hope you will be comfortable here. Now, I’ll get out of your way and let you two talk.” Then she left the two men alone.

A besotted grin on his face, Tyler watched her walk away. He really is happy, Reid thought, I could see why he would change careers to keep from having to leave her all the time.

“Follow me,” Tyler started up the stairs, “we’ve put you in the room adjoining my office. It’s one of my favorites.” He opened the door and motioned Reid to enter the room.

The room he walked into was the epitome of art deco styling. Wallpaper in a wide black and gray

stripe above simple white-paneled wainscot served as a backdrop for a large mirror in a gleaming silver frame that made him think of a bird in flight. The bed's headboard echoed the wing-like shape as did the dresser and a pair of nightstands.

A turquoise duvet provided just the right amount of color to keep the room from being too stark. On the wall across from the door, a stained glass window commanded his attention. Its winter scene echoed the colors in the room; white snow on a black tree below a blue sky was exquisitely wrought in glass.

Reid dropped his bag on the bed and turned to Tyler, "Nice digs."

"When Julie's great grandfather renovated the place, it seems he made a deal with a furniture designer; each room was decorated in a different style then photographed for print brochures. Julie got everything at a discount and at the time, since he was a bit of a notable figure, the designer got a publicity boost. Great for his pocketbook but it made for an eclectic house. Not that I'm complaining. I like all the different styles."

At Reid's approving nod, he explained, "There are four of these windows, one for each season. The whole house was remodeled in order to add them. Anyway, make yourself comfortable, I've got some research going in my office, first door on the left. Come on in whenever you're ready. I'm glad you decided to come." Though he still wondered what had caused this sudden visit, Tyler suppressed his journalistic instincts and elected not to pry. Reid would fill him in when he was ready.

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Tyler was off showing Reid the rest of the house and grounds when Amethyst and Kat arrived with Gustavia pulling in right behind them.

One look at Julie, her eyes glowing with anticipation and excitement, told Amethyst she would probably be kissing that tenner goodbye. Finding a new clue would not have put that look of blissful anticipation on Julie's face.

Her arm linked companionably with Kat's, Amethyst guided her friend inside. As many hours as she had spent here, Kat could probably navigate through most of the rooms without help but it had become second nature to offer a bit of unobtrusive assistance. Besides, the physical touch helped Amethyst feel more connected.

Lola entered the room at her usual pace and seeing Fritzie, Gustavia's canine companion immediately launched into the "Lola dance." Body twisted sideways, she leapt straight up, wiggled then with her front legs pounced and repeated the process. She looked both joyful and ridiculous. Fritzie, a longhaired Jack Russell terrier ran laps around the boxer as she danced, then the two of them trotted out of the room.

Shaking her head, Gustavia laughed at the spectacle then asked Julie, "What's the big news? You look like the cat that swallowed the pigeon."

"Canary," Kat corrected.

"Whatever," Gustavia replied with a wave of her hand. "My cats never once brought home a canary. Mice, frogs, snakes and pigeons—no canaries. I don't think I've ever even seen a canary."

Conceding defeat, Kat said, “Pigeons it is.”

Turning her attention back to Julie, she said, “Now, spill.”

“All in good time.” Julie led the way into the living room where she had already set out a tray with glasses and a pitcher of lemonade. Nearby, a stack of wedding magazines rested on the table and without even waiting for Julie to say another word, Amethyst pulled out the ten and pressed it into Kat’s hand.

“What’s that for?” Gustavia raised one eyebrow.

“Just wait for Julie’s news and you’ll see.”

Before Julie could get a word in, Kat spoke triumphantly, “They’re getting married.”

“That’s not news,” Gustavia replied. “We were there when he proposed, remember?”

“She means they’ve set the date.”

“December 27, right after Christmas.” Julie’s confirmation was followed by excited squeals and hugs of congratulation.

“Kind of short notice, is there anything else we need to know? You’re not…” Amethyst rubbed her belly.

“Pregnant? No, I’m not pregnant,” Julie finished the thought. “Tyler’s grandfather can’t travel this year—his health hasn’t been good—so most of his family is coming in for the holidays—that’s one reason.” She began to tick them off on her fingers. “I’ve always dreamed of being a winter bride—that’s another. When all this business with finding Great Grandfather’s cache is over, Grams will have to move on. If we get married now, it will mean she can attend.”

All sensible reasons.

Julie continued, “But mostly, we just want to be married. It feels like the right thing to do. We’re already committed to each other; why not celebrate that at a time when his entire family will be here anyway? I love him, he loves me, it’s just that simple.”

Tears stung Amethyst’s eyes and as she looked over at Gustavia and Kat, it seemed she was not the only one battling the urge to blubber. She remembered that feeling of eagerness, anticipation—the overwhelming desire to belong to someone and the absolute certainty that the someone you wanted to belong to was the right one for you. Each of those feelings was still fresh within her. Even after all this time. Even after the divorce. Sometimes that feeling welled up and nearly choked the breath from her body. She missed him, plain and simple. Deciding there was no sense in raining on someone else’s picnic; she forced those emotions back into the box, ruthlessly tamped down the lid, and then turned her attention back to Julie.

“So we decided to go for it and I knew I could count on your help to pull off an intimate wedding here at Hayward House. Just picture it—candles and flowers everywhere. That huge room Estelle uses as a studio space is about the size of a small banquet hall so the caterers could set up in there.”

Getting into the swing of things, Amethyst suggested, “We could use one of those heated party tents on the patio for dancing. And string fairy lights all over the gazebo. It would look spectacular.”

against the snow.”

“I’ve got a cousin who can play the wedding march beautifully on a harp and my uncle owns a print shop so we can get a rush job on the invitations,” Kat offered.

Julie just beamed. She had known her friends would pitch in to help her plan a beautiful wedding even with this short deadline. In the meantime, she had already asked Tyler to make one of his famous lists—guests, invitations, caterers, cake, music, and decorations. With her friend’s help, she had a lot of choices to make.

The four women made quite a picture. Julie with her hair pulled back, face bare of makeup and casually dressed smiled delightedly at something Gustavia said. The fixed gaze of Kat’s blind eyes still managed to be expressive; their warm blue a startling contrast to her peaches and cream complexion as she raised a graceful hand to tuck silky strands of sable hair behind her ear.

Gustavia presented a feast of color and texture; her blond hair dipping just below shoulder length dressed in a coronet of braids at the crown was interwoven with bright red and orange beads in homage to autumn; her skirt was bright yellow shading to orange at the hem.

Seeming thoughtful and slightly less animated than the others; Amethyst was fully outfitted in her signature color. Blunt-cut, chin-length hair in palest lavender matched a pair of elegantly arched eyebrows that framed crystal, green eyes. Dressed from head to toe in her favorite color, she wore comfortable jeans the color of orchids, an aubergine, striped tee and bright purple, high top Converse sneakers.

That’s how Tyler and Reid found them.

Chapter One

Amethyst looked up as Tyler walked into the room saying, “Hello ladies, I’d like to introduce you all to my friend Reid.”

Her eyes locked on him and the world turned over.

All the blood drained out of her face, her stomach lurched and lodged itself firmly in her throat as she tried to swallow with a mouth gone dry.

After stopping for an endless moment, her heart thumped hard against her chest, then began to beat so quickly she thought the others surely could hear it.

This couldn’t be happening. What was he doing here of all places? She turned her head away to try and get the raging emotions under control before anyone noticed.

Completely oblivious to Amethyst’s distress, Tyler continued, “Reid, these are our very dear friends Kat, Gustavia and Amethyst.”

Dimly through the sound of blood rushing back into her head, face flushed, Amethyst listened as Reid was greeted warmly by the others.

A jumble of thoughts arced through her mind. Had he tracked her here? And why would he both after all this time? Three years. It felt like a lifetime had passed since she had seen his face.

No. Tyler seemed to know him so this must be a coincidence. Some cruel twist of fate.

That face, she sneaked a peek—as familiar to her as her own—he looked older, tired. Unexpected sadness welled up in her as memory after memory played through her mind like a film. Now she knew what it meant to have your life pass before your eyes.

Defiantly she lifted her head and said, “Hello Reid.”

That voice. It was his turn to goggle and turn pale. He hadn’t recognized her, she’d changed her hair—well, that was inevitable. And even her eyebrows were dyed to match—but that voice, that unmistakable voice. “Hello Jane.” Elation shot through him but he ruthlessly controlled his face, blanking it so she wouldn’t see.

“No one’s called me that in years.” For someone so slight, the husky, silky depth of her voice was always a surprise. It sent a chill up his spine.

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