

A man with dark hair, wearing a dark shirt and tie, is shown in profile from the chest up. He is looking upwards and to the right, with his hand resting against his chin in a thoughtful or contemplative pose. The background is a solid, muted blue-grey color.

FOR HER EYES ONLY

He's the one
man she can't
resist...

JoAnn Ross
Untamed

JoAnn Ross

Untamed

«HarperCollins»

Ross J.

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Strong-minded Gavin Thomas was determined to have his own way and to find out the truth about beautiful and beguiling Tara Delaney. When Tara literally fainted in Gavin's arms, he felt as if a lightning bolt had just hit him. He'd finally found the woman he'd spent a lifetime looking for. But something had kept Tara away from Whiskey River. While Gavin wanted to seduce this fiery woman, he needed to discover what secret kept them apart...except he had no idea exactly how bewitching Tara really was....

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A clap of thunder shook the porch...

Gavin, who had dozed off in a large wing chair positioned to give him a good view of the front windows, was jolted awake by the crack of thunder and almost simultaneous bolt of lightning. On some subconscious level he'd been aware of a loud thud just after the lightning flash that had obviously struck very close to the house.

“All right!” It was what he'd been waiting for, an opportunity to catch the vandals in the act. He ran into the foyer and yanked open the ornately carved front door.

Instead of the teenage boys he'd thought he would find, Gavin found himself staring down at a seemingly lifeless form lying at his feet. When another flash of lightning—thankfully more distant this time—lit up the sky, he stared in disbelief at a woman who could have stepped right out of that long-ago photograph of Brigid Delaney.

JOANN ROSS

New York Times bestselling author JoAnn Ross has written over seventy novels and has been published in twenty-six countries, including Russia, China, France and Turkey. Two of her titles have been excerpted in Cosmopolitan magazine and her books have also been featured by Doubleday Book Club and the Literary Guild. She's received numerous awards, including a Lifetime Career Achievement Award from Romantic Times magazine, and is a popular conference speaker. JoAnn lives with her husband in Tennessee, where she gains inspiration from the view of the misty Smoky Mountains out of her home office windows.

Untamed
Joann Ross

**FOR HER
EYES ONLY**



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1

A full moon rode high in the midnight sky, casting a shimmering silver light over the ancient forest, illuminating the lone woman who moved with the suppleness of a sleek jungle panther amidst the tangled trunks of the leafless oak trees. Her hooded black cape blended into the shadows as she made her way through the swirling mists of fog to the clearing.

The night was silent save for the sad sigh of the north wind in the tops of the towering pine trees, the occasional sweet, lonely cry of an owl, the croaks of frogs in the meadow pond. The familiar night sounds were primal music to the woman's ears, reaching deep into her soul, stirring the wildness that lurked in her heart.

It was music from an ancient time, a time when primitive man trembled with fear against the unseen denizens of the dark night. A time when her people ruled with wisdom and power.

A time of magic.

When she reached the clearing, the woman turned her exquisite face skyward and received a warm infusion of energy from her mother, the moon. She lifted her arms, palms turned upward toward the icy stars. Her ripe vermilion lips began chanting words taught to her while still in her cradle. Words passed down from generation to generation, words that flowed warmly through her veins along with the blood that made her who she was.

And what she was.

A witch.

Her greeting completed, she slipped off the hooded cape and let it fall to the ground. The wind caught her freed long hair, whipping it into a wild jet froth about her face. Beneath the hood, she was wearing the clothes she always donned when fighting those who would use the night to cloak their evil ways.

The jet metal breastplate of the sleek black bodysuit shaped her lush breasts into two glistening cones in a way that was designed to send male pulses hammering. Black leather boots encased her long legs to mid-thigh.

Around her neck, she wore a silver chain on which hung a silver amulet that nestled between those glorious, uplifted breasts. The woman opened the amulet and took out a small vial of scented oil, which she sprinkled over the wood she'd already gathered and stacked in the sacred circle of stones.

With the powers of midnight vibrating through her, she held her hands out over the wood, which instantly ignited in a whoosh of wind and flame.

Closing her eyes, feeling the heat of the crackling fire in the marrow of her bones, the woman known as Morganna concentrated on the faces of her enemies. In her mind she saw them melting like candles amidst the dancing, deadly flames. She heard their agonized screams. And suffered their pain. Spellmakers who dealt in the dark side did not escape unscathed.

A lethal heat suffused her, fire flicked at her nerve endings, but Morganna did not flinch. Nor did she cry out. These acts of vengeance were her calling. Since her fate was both preordained and inescapable, she bore her pain in silence.

And when it was completed, when the scorching flames gave way to the cooling, comforting rain, she lifted her arms once again to the midnight sky and offered a prayer of thanksgiving.

"It is done," she said finally, breathing a deep, satisfied sigh of achievement.

She was physically and psychically drained. Her legs had as much substance as the sea as she slowly folded to the ground. For an unfathomable time her mind was washed clean, healing her of the torturous burdens she'd willingly undertaken.

"IT IS DONE."

Gavin Thomas nodded with satisfaction as he signed his name to the last frame of this latest adventure of Morganna, Mistress of the Night.

The crime-fighting witch had outdone herself this time. And looked damn good while doing it, he decided, casting a judicial eye over the full-color drawing of the luscious female body glowing orange and silver from the moon and firelight.

Gavin would be the first to admit that his creation probably stirred up the hormonal juices in more than one teenage male. But what was so wrong with that? he'd asked detractors on more than one occasion. Besides, his graphic novels—which those same detractors insisted on calling comic books—were not nearly as sexually explicit as the stuff kids saw every day on those rock and rap videos on MTV.

And Morganna, while admittedly dabbling in black magic, was, after all, a force for good. For truth, justice, Mom, apple pie and the American way.

She was, he'd told late-night TV talk-show host Tom Snyder just last week, this generation's Superman. But a lot better looking.

He'd even finished up the interview by saying that if he ever met a female who was half the woman the fictitious Morganna was, he'd marry her on the spot.

Tom had laughed—that familiar too-many-cigarettes rasp—as he was supposed to. What the talk-show host had no way of knowing was that Gavin wasn't joking.

THE LETTER ARRIVED in the morning mail. Tara Delaney did not have to open the cream linen envelope to know what the letter inside would say. The return address—from an Arizona attorney—told her all she needed to know.

Why wouldn't they leave her alone?

She tossed the letter unopened into the wastebasket beside her desk, went into her bedroom and tried to resume packing for her long overdue vacation. With her usual attention to detail, she'd planned the trip to Kauai months ago. A beachfront condo was booked for the next two weeks, her airline tickets had been purchased weeks ago and she'd even bought two new bikinis and a sheer white cover-up. Tomorrow she'd be lying on the beach, soaking up the tropical sun and beginning to make her way through the stack of novels she was always buying but never had time to read.

"You deserve this vacation," she reminded herself as she packed her toiletries. "You've earned it." She tossed the sunblock into a plastic-lined zipper bag. "You can't let anything—or anyone—stand in your way."

It was a dandy little pep talk, and it should have worked. Would have worked had it not been for the siren call of that discarded letter.

"Oh, hell." She stomped back into the living room, pulled the envelope out of the wastebasket and opened it with the sterling-silver opener fashioned in the shape of a Celtic cross she'd received as a Midsummer Day gift from her artist father. The paragraph of legalese repeated what the other letters had told her: that she was now the proud owner of a one-hundred-year-old Victorian house in Whiskey River, Arizona.

Sighing, she put the letter down, picked up the phone and dialed a number she knew by heart.

"Hello, Tara dear," the smoothly modulated voice answered after the first ring. "I was just thinking of you."

Tara stifled a sigh. "It figures."

"A mother always knows when her child is upset," Lina Delaney said. "As you'll discover yourself someday."

Tara was suddenly reminded of all the times while she was growing up she'd tried to put something over on her mother. And failed.

"It would be nice," she said crankily, "if just once I could keep something to myself."

"Your thoughts are your own, Tara." Her mother's tone remained steadfastly calm, as always. "I would certainly never pry."

Tara decided this was not the time to mention that little episode during her seventeenth summer when she'd lied about a slumber party at Mary Bretton's house in order to spend the night with Jeff

Townsend, whose parents were out of town for the weekend. Her mother had phoned the Townsend house before Jeff had managed to get her blouse entirely unbuttoned. A pregnant little pause settled over the long-distance telephone lines.

“Is this about your grandmother’s house?” Lina finally asked.

“No.” Tara shook her head firmly. “Definitely not.”

“Oh.” A disappointed tone crept into her mother’s voice. “I was hoping you’d changed your mind about keeping your inheritance.”

Tara figured she’d already inherited enough problems from her grandmother, Brigid Delaney. “I told you, Mom, I don’t want the house.”

“Then why don’t you sell it?”

Good question. And one Tara had asked herself at least once a day during the six months since her grandmother’s sudden death.

“Are you going to be home this afternoon?” she asked suddenly.

“For my only daughter? Of course,” Lina said without hesitation. “I’ll make that marigold custard you like so well.”

“That sounds wonderful.”

Despite her uncharacteristic moodiness, Tara was smiling as she hung up the phone. Her mother might not resemble a typical American mom, and she definitely didn’t bear the faintest resemblance to those early television mothers that showed up on late-night cable television, but the one thing Lina Delaney and Mrs. Cleaver had in common was the notion that there was no problem a home-baked dessert couldn’t solve.

Five minutes later, as she pulled out of her driveway, Tara found herself wondering how Wally and the Beav would have handled having a white witch for a mother.

GAVIN CURSED as he passed Brigid Delaney’s house on the way to the post office and saw that another window had been broken. Although he told himself that he should be grateful that breaking the windows of what was known as “the witch’s haunted house” was as bad as juvenile crime got in Whiskey River, it still irritated him that the kids couldn’t just go out to the dump and shoot at tin cans with BB guns like kids in other rural towns.

Over breakfast at the Branding Iron Café, Trace Callahan, Whiskey River’s sheriff, suggested the logical solution. “I’ll have J.D. board the windows up,” he said as he dug into his Rustler’s Special—steak, eggs and cottage fries.

“It shouldn’t be the county’s responsibility,” Gavin said grumpily. “If Brigid’s damn granddaughter would just do something with the house—move into it, sell it, burn it down, even—we wouldn’t be having this discussion.”

“Are you sure she’s been notified?”

“I know Brigid’s attorney sent official notification, then followed up with a bunch of letters. Hell, I wrote a couple myself. But there hasn’t been any response.”

“Maybe she’s moved.”

“Then the letters should come back.”

“True.” Trace considered that for a moment. “Maybe the county will take the house over when she falls behind in her taxes. In the meantime, it’s becoming a public nuisance. The closer we get to Halloween, the more likely it is that one of those kids is going to burn the place down. Since I want to avoid that, it only makes sense to have J.D. board up the windows. And bolt the doors.”

“Bolts and boards aren’t free. Last I heard the Mogollon County bookmobile was having to cut back on hours because of a lack of funds.” He didn’t mention sending in a sizable anonymous donation to keep that from happening.

Trace shrugged. “We’ve got some spare pieces of plywood hanging around after replacing the damage last month’s storm did to the jail roof. No point in it going to waste. As for J.D., I don’t think he’d mind doing the job off the books.”

This was another thing Gavin liked about small towns. In the city, such a suggestion would call for innumerable oversight committees, public hearings, newspaper editorials and Lord knows what else. Here in Whiskey River, things were definitely more laid-back. The live-and-let-live attitude was one of the reasons he'd chosen to settle here.

"Thanks for the offer, but I don't mind replacing the windows. Mostly I was just blowing off steam."

Trace eyed him over the rim of the coffee mug. "You know, Brigid Delaney's windows aren't your responsibility, either."

"That's what I keep telling myself," Gavin said.

"And?"

"And for some reason I can't make myself believe it."

"Maybe she cast a spell on you," Trace joked.

"That's one answer. Of course to believe it, I'd have to also believe that the old lady was a witch."

"So are you saying she was a fraud? Or a liar?"

"Neither. Not exactly." Gavin frowned into the thick black depths of his coffee as he framed his response. "I think she honestly believed that she possessed special powers. And from the business her mail-order herb catalog brought in, it's obvious a lot of other people around the country thought so, too. But I've just never bought into the notion of ghosts and goblins and things that go bump in the night."

"Yet the heroine of all your books is a witch."

Gavin was grateful when Trace referred to them as books and not comics. Not many people bothered to make the distinction.

"I created Morganna to fill a niche," he said. "And to fill all those hours when I was behind bars." Gavin's scowl darkened as it always did when he thought back to his imprisonment. "Just when I thought for sure I'd go stir-crazy, I read about Wicca being one of the fastest growing religions in the country and decided to cash in on a trend."

And cash in he did. The success of Morganna, Mistress of the Night, had been nothing short of phenomenal.

"If you ask me," Trace said in a drawl that harkened back to the Texas roots he shared with Gavin, "Morganna's success has as much to do with her crime-fighting outfit as it does her sorcery."

Because the comment came from a man Gavin considered a good friend, a man whose dogged devotion to the truth had eventually earned him his freedom, Gavin didn't take offense. Especially since it happened to be true.

"Got a point there," he said agreeably. His quick grin faded as his thoughts returned to Brigid's house. "Although I never believed Brigid was a witch, unfortunately the kids in town do. Which is why they seem determined to break every window in the damn house."

"I wish I had the resources to put a man on the place for a few nights," Trace mused. "The problem with teenage vandalism is that it can lead down a rocky path straight to a jail cell."

Knowing that the former big-city cop had put in his own time on the wrong side of the bars in the juvenile justice system, Gavin figured Trace knew what he was talking about.

"You know," he said, "that's not a bad idea. I don't know why it didn't occur to me sooner." The more he thought about it, the more he liked it. "I could do that."

"Do what?"

"I could spend a couple of nights in the house. Wait for the kids to break a window, catch them in the act, then bring them to you for the scared-straight lecture."

Trace's expression was decidedly doubtful as he considered the proposed plan. "You're not talking about being armed or anything?"

"Hell, Trace, you know I've never owned any guns. I just want those kids to leave the old lady's house alone."

“I hadn’t realized you were that close.”

“Neither had I,” Gavin admitted. “Until she was gone. Then I realized that somehow, when I wasn’t looking, she became the closest thing to a real family I’ve had in years.” He put some money on the table and stood. “Give Mariah a hug for me.”

Trace smiled at the mention of his wife’s name. Not a day went by that he didn’t consider himself the luckiest man on the face of the planet to have had such a gorgeous, sexy, intelligent, talented woman fall in love with him.

“She’s been away for four days wheeling and dealing in L.A., and as soon as she gets back tonight I intend to give her a lot more than a hug,” he said. “But I doubt your name will come up.”

Gavin laughed. “You’re a lucky man, Trace.”

“That’s what Mariah keeps telling me.” Trace grinned back. “You know, marriage isn’t such a bad institution, pal.”

“That’s what you keep telling me. And call me crazy, but having already experienced life in an institution, I think I’ll pass.”

“I’m serious.” Sober gunmetal gray eyes echoed Trace’s words. “From what I can tell, you spend all your time working.”

“When you love what you’re doing, it isn’t work,” Gavin automatically responded with the answer he usually gave to interviewers who remarked on his apparent lack of any life outside his work.

“Yeah, I read that quote in Newsweek.” Trace waved the words away with his left hand, his simple woven-gold wedding band gleaming in the buttery morning light. “I didn’t buy it then and I don’t now. The way it looks to me, all you’ve done is change your prison stripes for a denim jacket.”

“What’s that supposed to mean?”

“It means that the trappings may have changed. But although you’ve said that one of the reasons you came to Whiskey River was to enjoy life, you might as well still be spending your days behind bars.”

Gavin frowned. “That’s not a real attractive image you’re painting there, Trace.”

“If the boot fits,” Trace said mildly. “Mariah has asked you to dinner six times in the past month. And each time you’ve said you had to work.”

“I was up against a deadline.”

“That’s what you said. But you also just told me you mailed the new book off to your publisher this morning. So how about steaks tonight?”

“If Mariah’s been in L.A. for four days, the last thing you two need is me crashing your reunion.”

“Tomorrow, then.”

“I have this idea I thought I’d flesh out. About Morganna taking on a bunch of gang bangers—”

“See. That’s exactly what I’m talking about.” Trace folded his arms and shook his head. “You just finished a project. What the hell would be wrong with taking a few days R and R to recharge the batteries?”

“And do what?”

“Hell, I don’t know. Take up fishing.”

“I hate fish. Catching them and eating them.”

“Hiking, then. Or mountain climbing. Or go into Payson or Flagstaff and pick up a wild woman in some cowboy bar. When was the last time you got laid?”

Gavin took a moment to consider that question and realized that the fact that he couldn’t remember was not a good sign.

“You’ve made your point. Maybe I will have dinner in Flagstaff tonight.”

“Good.” Nodding his satisfaction, Trace stood and tossed a few bills onto the table beside Gavin’s. “Mariah will be glad to hear you’re at least attempting to have some kind of social life. She worries about you.”

“She’s just like every other woman in the world,” Gavin retorted as they left the café. “She can’t bear to see an unmarried man running around loose.”

“Believe me, pal,” Trace said as he stopped beside his black-and-white Suburban with the Mogollon County seal on the door, “there’s something to be said for spending your life in captivity with a gorgeous sexy woman.”

“Ah, but that’s my point. I do.”

Trace laughed at the obvious reference to the fictional Morganna. “I was talking about a flesh-and-blood woman.” He unlocked the door and climbed into the driver’s seat. “Have fun tonight. You’ve earned a night on the town. Just don’t try to drive back up that mountain after drinking. I’d hate to have to scrape you off the pavement.”

“More than two beers and I’ll crash in a motel. Or better yet, in some winsome young thing’s bed.”

“Always helps to keep a positive outlook,” Trace agreed with a grin.

Gavin was walking across the parking lot when he heard Trace call out his name. He turned and saw that the sheriff had rolled down the driver’s window. “What now?”

“Don’t forget protection.”

Gavin had a choice. He could be either annoyed or amused. He opted for amusement. “Yes, Mother.”

2

THE DRIVE TO her parents' home in Santa Cruz took only two hours, although Tara felt as if she were a time traveler, journeying back to the 1960s. Her parents lived in a commune that had been established by a group of counterculture rebels who'd found the San Francisco Haight-Ashbury hippie scene too commercially artificial for their tastes.

They'd been part of the small band of flower children who'd traveled down the coast, pooled their scant resources and bought a small dairy farm with the intention of using the proceeds from the milk and ice cream to fund their various artistic enterprises.

Serendipity had proven to be their ally. More than one of the commune members had achieved fame and fortune. Among the former residents was a world-famous balladeer, a Pulitzer prize-winning novelist and, of course her father, who could boast, if he were so inclined which he wasn't, that the past three First Ladies had been seen wearing bracelets fashioned in his workshop.

And as if to prove that Mistress Fate did indeed have a sense of humor, last year Contented Cows, Inc.—specializing in dairy products from cows fed organically grown dandelions—had been purchased by C. S. Mackay Enterprises, which had allowed the band of former anticapitalists to pay off the mortgage on the two-hundred-acre site.

It was here Tara had grown up, one of several children granted a freedom unknown to the average kid in suburban America. During her preschool years, clothes had been optional, and although studies were never neglected, the teaching methods at the commune school had definitely not come from mainstream textbooks.

Science had been more often than not taught outdoors, beneath the wide sky overlooking the sea. All those hours spent exploring tide pools and charting stars and Pacific storms and growing the gardens that supplied the extended family with vegetables had intensified Tara's affinity for nature.

Music and art were as important to the members of the small community as the air they breathed, and censorship, of course, was unheard-of. The commune library was extensive and varied, and was one of the reasons Tara's love of the written word had flourished.

Such a freewheeling atmosphere might be nirvana for someone wanting to grow up to be another Michelangelo or Georgette Heyer. A budding John Lennon or Bob Dylan would never lack for musicians to jam with. And there wasn't an adult in residence who wouldn't stop work to listen to a child's poem.

But Tara had always had the need for some boundaries in her life. She could still recall, vividly, when as a seven-year-old she had accompanied her parents to a Renaissance fair in Midland, Texas, and had been overwhelmed by the vastness of the country. The flat west Texas landscape, with its horizons stretching far in the distance on all four compass points, had made her feel as if she were adrift on a small dinghy in the middle of the ocean.

Later, she'd often felt exactly the same way living in the commune. While other teenagers all over the world were rebelling against authority, demanding freedom, Tara found the dictates of following one's own star unnerving.

The lack of boundaries had given her more than her share of anxiety attacks, and had definitely inhibited her social life. It was only when she'd discovered her love for mathematics, and the purity of numbers whose values never changed and always did what they were supposed to do—so long as you followed the rules and theorems—that she'd begun to feel comfortable.

From that day forward, she'd buried herself in her textbooks and, to the good-natured amusement of the adults in residence, had become the first math nerd in the artistic communal family.

Her mother was waiting for her outside the house her father had designed—a wonderfully sprawling series of cubes and towers perched on a rocky cliff overlooking the ocean. It was daring

even for this community, and whenever anyone asked Darren McKenna what he would do when the house inevitably slid into the sea, he promptly answered, “Build another one, of course.”

Her father never had been one to look beyond the moment. Which made him the opposite of his daughter, who could, with a quick glance at her leather-bound organizer, tell what she’d be doing at any given hour weeks into the future.

“Tara, darling.” Her mother’s flowing skirt swirled around her legs as she spanned the distance between them. “Welcome home. It’s been too long.”

As she returned her mother’s embrace, Tara breathed in the scent of custom-blended jasmine and gardenia and felt instantly comforted.

“It’s good to be here.” It was true, Tara realized with some surprise. For the first time in as long as she could remember, she’d entered the gates with a sense of relief, a sense of homecoming.

Her mother leaned her head back and gave her a long maternal look that gave Tara the feeling that she could see all the way inside her. To her heart. Her soul.

“You haven’t been sleeping well,” Lina diagnosed.

“Now you’re monitoring my dreams?” Tara tried for a friendly flippant tone and had to cringe when the words came out overly defensive.

“Actually, it was the shadows beneath your eyes that gave you away,” Lina said mildly. “And the fact that you’re too pale. Even for someone living in the city.”

“I’ve always been fair skinned.” Her ivory complexion had been the bane of her existence during her teenage years when she’d struggled to gain the golden tan the boys seemed to admire so on the other California girls.

“True. In that respect, as well as so many others, you take after your grandmother,” Lina agreed. “But you’ve always had an inner glow.” She reached out and trailed the back of her hand up Tara’s cheek. “It’s missing.”

“It’s only stress. One of my clients is a computer company that just completed negotiations for buying a software firm. I’ve been working nearly around the clock combing through years of back financial statements.”

After graduating from Cal Poly University with an M.B.A., Tara had taken a top-level job in the financial department of a San Francisco Fortune 500 company. She’d continued to go to night school and had earned her C.P.A., but apparently she was more like her parents than she’d thought because she began to find the corporate atmosphere stifling. Eventually, she’d struck out on her own, becoming a consultant, and although she worked harder than she ever had as an employee, she enjoyed the ability to pick and choose her jobs.

“All the more reason to take a break and visit your mother.” Although Lina’s tone was characteristically mild, she could not keep the seeds of worry from her expressive hazel eyes.

“We’ll have tea out on the patio. And we’ll talk. About your work, your vacation. And whatever else you’d like.”

“I definitely don’t want to talk about Brigid’s house.”

“Of course you do, dear.” Lina laced their fingers together and led Tara into the house. “That’s why you’re here.”

Tara did not even try to argue. There was no need. Because, although she hadn’t realized it until this moment, once again, her mother was right.

As she sat overlooking the sun-gilded waters and sipped a cup of lemon balm tea, and helped herself to a second helping of the smooth yellow custard made with crushed marigold petals from her mother’s garden, Tara could literally feel the tension that had her shoulders tied up in knots slipping away.

“This is nice,” she murmured, enjoying the sight of sea gulls diving for fish out amidst the breakers. “I hadn’t realized how long it’s been since I’ve taken a breather.”

“You work too hard.”

Tara knew her mother's comment was not criticism but merely observation. She opened her mouth to argue, but knew she could never lie to this woman.

"I know." She sighed. "But it's not as if I have a choice."

"We always have a choice, dear."

"That's easy for you to say," Tara flared, her nerves more on edge than she'd thought. "You dropped out thirty years ago. Some of us prefer life in the real world."

"Reality is where you find it, I suppose," Lina murmured, frustrating Tara even further.

As much as she truly loved her mother, she could not remember a single instance in her life when she'd been able to get a good argument going with her. Although Lina Delaney never withheld her feelings, neither would she try to force others into agreeing with her. She was, truly, a free spirit.

"Speaking of reality," Tara said, wanting to steer the subject away from her work, "I read in the paper that you've started working for the FBI."

Although her mother had never used her powers of second sight for profit, over the years stories of her psychic ability had become public knowledge. So much so that Lina's assistance was routinely requested by law enforcement officials who, while not exactly admitting belief, had solved more than one case with information given to them by Lina Delaney.

It was Lina's turn to sigh. Her gaze became distant as she looked out toward the horizon where a line of fishing boats trawled for tuna. "They thought I might be able to help them locate that serial killer who seems to be moving across the country."

"And?"

Lina briefly closed her eyes, as if to shut out the images she'd received from the evidence the police had collected in three western and two southern states. "I believe I may have provided some assistance."

Tara saw the pain etched in deep lines on her mother's tanned face. "I'm sorry." She reached out and took Lina's hand in hers. "It was rough, huh?"

"It wasn't pleasant." Lina linked their fingers together. "It also reminded me how very fortunate we are to have each other. All those young female victims had no one to care about them."

"Yes, they did." Tara squeezed her mother's hand. "They had you."

Lina smiled at that, a warm smile that for Tara had always been capable of soothing the cruelest of pains. "A bit late, I'm afraid," she said. "But thank you." Her expression sobered. "I know you said you don't want to talk about Brigid, but there's something I must tell you."

"What?" Tara asked with a sigh of resignation.

"I don't believe her death was from natural causes."

Tara felt the shock all the way through her body. "What do you mean? Surely she wouldn't have..."

"No. Of course your grandmother wouldn't have taken her own life. She relished every moment too dearly. But I've been receiving the most disturbing vibrations. And whenever I dream of the night she died, there's always a shadowy figure in the background. And a force so powerful it chills my blood."

Tara stared at her mother, unable to recall a single time she'd ever seen her looking so distraught. "I don't understand. With your gift—"

"You'd think I'd be able to see what happened, wouldn't you?" Lina broke in uncharacteristically. She shook her head. "I only see the shadow. Your father suggested it's because I'm too emotionally close to the situation."

"I suppose that makes sense," Tara allowed. "In fact, maybe the reason for the dreams in the first place is because you can't accept Brigid's death."

"I thought that might be the case, in the beginning. But now I don't think it is."

"Are you saying you think Brigid was murdered?"

“That sounds so overly dramatic, doesn’t it? And murder is such an ugly word.” Lina sighed. “Honestly, darling, I don’t know what to think.”

Neither did Tara. “I can’t imagine anyone wanting to kill Grandy.”

“I know. Everyone loved her so.”

“And you told me the coroner ruled that she’d suffered a heart attack, which made her fall down the stairs.” Tara still felt guilty for missing her grandmother’s funeral. But a late-spring blizzard had kept her in Moscow, where she’d been helping a Russian-American entrepreneur open a pizza parlor.

“That was his official opinion. But I still can’t shake the feeling that he was wrong. That being the case, I suppose I should be relieved you don’t want to take possession of the house. I certainly wouldn’t want something horrible happening to you, darling.”

“You don’t have to worry. The only thing I have to worry about is getting burned from too much Hawaiian sun.”

Mother and daughter sat, hand in hand, watching as the blazing gold ball of sun dipped into the water, turning it a fiery crimson. Neither spoke. There was no need. As always, their thoughts were perfectly attuned.

Such was the legacy of the Delaney women. The legacy Tara had spent so many of her twenty-six years trying to escape. A legacy she feared, as she sat in the warming glow of the setting sun, she could no longer ignore.

All the way back to San Francisco she told herself that she was not going to Whiskey River. The town held too many painful memories for her. Besides, Brigid was dead. There wasn’t any reason to return.

But then Tara thought of her mother’s atypical anxiety, and although she was certain that the dreams were merely a manifestation of emotional loss, that didn’t make them any less upsetting. Perhaps, Tara considered, the thing to do would be to put the house on the market and get rid of it once and for all. Then, maybe, her mother’s mind could be at peace.

Knowing it was the right thing to do—the only thing she could do—Tara reluctantly called her travel agent and canceled her trip. Afterward, she unpacked all the beach and resort wear from her suitcases and tossed in some jeans and sweaters instead.

Then, frustrated but determined, she set the alarm in order to get an early start on the long, lonely drive to Arizona.

THE INSIDE OF Brigid Delaney’s house was, to put it charitably, a mess. A layer of dust covered everything like a ghostly shroud, spiders had taken up residence in all the corners of the ceiling, there was evidence that a family of mice had moved in and there were so many cobwebs draped over picture frames and chandeliers that Gavin felt as if he’d stumbled into Dickens’s *Great Expectations*.

“Miss Faversham, I presume,” he muttered, sweeping away a particularly thick cobweb hanging from a gilt-framed black-and-white photo of Brigid, clad in a wide straw hat and flower-sprigged cotton dress, gathering herbs in her garden.

The elderly woman he’d grown fond of had been striking. The young woman in the picture was a beauty. Her long wavy hair spilled from her straw hat like a rippling waterfall and her expressive, laughing eyes dominated a high cheekboned face.

Dress her in silks and satins and she could have been a princess. The amazing thing was that, although she’d had a presence that had reminded him of royalty, he’d never met a more down-to-earth woman in his life. Despite her distracting habit of insisting she was a witch.

“Dammit, Brigid.” He glared at the photo as if its subject were capable of discerning his irritation, which, if even half her stories were to be believed, she just well might. “I’m doing my best here. But next time you decide to die and leave everything to a relative, couldn’t you at least make certain the recipient is willing to accept the inheritance?”

He glanced around, depressed by the sight of the parlor that had always been cozy and tidy, looking so forlorn. Telling himself that he was only cleaning the place so he could spend the night in it without giving himself the creeps, he went out onto the service porch, gathered up a bucket and mop and set to work.

IT WAS RAINING when Tara finally pulled into the driveway of her grandmother's home. Storms in Arizona's high country could be wild, and this one was no exception. Lightning flashed and thunder boomed like cannon fire. Wind wailed like the cries of lost souls in the treetops and drove the rain across the windshield of her sensible sedan with a force that had rendered visibility next to impossible as she'd driven the last thirty miles up the narrow, curving road to Whiskey River.

Then suddenly, a jagged bolt of lightning lit up the sky in a blinding white sulfurous flash, illuminating the house.

It hadn't changed. Tara didn't know why she thought it might have. Beneath the cloud white gingerbread trim, the fish-scale siding was still sky blue and the patterned windows flanking the arched front door were the same colored glass that Tara remembered gleaming like a princess's jewels when the morning sunlight streamed through them.

The copper roof of the tower had shone briefly in the bright light like a welcoming beacon and reminded her of summer tea parties she'd hosted for her grandmother and her dolls in that octagon-shaped room overlooking the garden.

This was the home where Brigid had given birth to her daughter, Lina, who, not wanting to break the chain of Delaney women, had kept her maiden name when she'd married, handing it down to her own daughter.

This was also the house where Brigid had soothed her granddaughter's broken heart after what Tara would always call the "Richard debacle." And proving that life was indeed made up of concentric circles, her grandmother had died here, as well. Of an accident, Tara thought firmly.

"Well, Grandy," she murmured as she looped her hands over the steering wheel and gazed at the house that was once again shrouded in rain and darkness, "you got your wish. I'm here. Although I'll be damned if I know why."

She took the key her grandmother's attorney had sent her out of her purse, then retrieved her overnight bag from the back seat. The larger bags in the trunk could wait until tomorrow.

She considered waiting a bit longer in hopes that the rain would at least slow down. But a glance up into a sky draped in black clouds assured her that the storm had stalled directly over Brigid's home.

"Nice welcome, Grandy. The least you could have done was use a few of your powers to turn off the waterworks."

She counted to three, then opened the car door and, holding her bag against her chest, made a dash for the front porch, which took longer than planned because she had to stop and unlatch the white picket gate.

By the time she reached the wide porch, she was drenched, and shivering. She'd forgotten how cold it could get in the mountains.

Beneath a winged griffin door knocker that had frightened Tara when she was a child was a shiny new doorknob. Wondering what had happened to the old hammered-brass handle she remembered having polished on more than one occasion, she managed to insert the key into the lock and was vastly relieved when it fit.

Just as she turned the knob, a clap of thunder shook the porch. An instant later she was blinded by a flash of brilliant white light. The acrid smell of sulfur assaulted her nostrils and a black veil drifted across her eyes.

Then Tara crumbled to the wooden floor beneath her feet.

Gavin, who had dozed off in a large wing chair positioned to give him a good view of the front windows, was jolted awake by the crack of thunder and almost simultaneous bolt of lightning.

On some subconscious level, he'd been aware of a loud thud just after the lightning flash that had obviously struck very close to the house.

“All right!” It was what he'd been waiting for, an opportunity to catch the vandals in the act. He ran into the foyer and yanked open the ornately carved front door.

Instead of the teenage boys he'd thought he would find, Gavin found himself staring down at a seemingly lifeless form lying at his feet.

When another flash of lightning—thankfully more distant this time—lit up the sky, he stared in disbelief at a woman who could have stepped right out of that long-ago photograph of Brigid Delaney.

3

TARA HAD NO IDEA how long she'd been unconscious. One minute she was standing on the familiar front porch fretting about a missing door handle, the next thing she knew she was in some man's arms, being carried into the darkened house. The house where her mother believed Brigid had been murdered!

"Put me down!" she demanded as she desperately tried to remember the self-defense training class she'd taken after nearly being mugged as she left her San Francisco office late one night.

"And have you swooning at my feet again?" Although the woman resembled a young Brigid Delaney, Gavin realized she had to be the granddaughter, the hotshot accounting whiz Brigid had boasted about.

"I didn't swoon." Tara glared up at him, frustrated when the deep shadows kept her from seeing his face. "I never swoon."

"Could've fooled me." Although it was not easy, maneuvering across the crowded room in the dark with a wiggling, angry woman in his arms, he managed to make his way to the red brocade chaise.

"If you're planning on raping me," Tara said between gritted teeth as she landed on the antique fainting couch with a bounce, "you should know that I've studied karate."

"Good for you." Gavin reached into the drawer of the papier-mâché table and pulled out the box of matches he knew Brigid kept there. Storms were a routine part of living in this remote corner of the state, making power outages commonplace. "Perhaps, after we get to know each other better, you can entertain me by breaking bricks with your bare hands."

The match flared as he struck it on the roughened side of the box, casting his face in an orange glow that made him look almost demonic. Her head still reeling, Tara tried to judge her chances for escape as he touched the match to the fat beeswax candle on the table.

"Who are you? And what are you doing in my grandmother's house?"

"I'm Gavin Thomas. The guy who sent you three separate letters wanting to know what the hell you wanted me to do with this place."

Sensing what they'd been about, and receiving disturbing vibrations from the envelopes that bore the bold masculine script, she had burned the letters without opening them.

"I don't recall receiving any letters." She lifted her chin and looked him right in the eye. "Obviously, the postman misdelivered them."

"Or you mistook them for junk mail and tossed them out," he said, deciding not to call her on the obvious lie. At least not yet.

"I suppose that's a possibility." Refusing to let him get the upper hand, she did not avert her gaze. Not even when his lips twitched and a wicked, knowing look came into his eyes. "If I had gotten the letters, what would they have said?"

"That I'd promised Brigid I'd look after the place until you arrived to take it off my hands. The last one mentioned, as politely as I could think to put it, that although I intended to do my best to live up to my word, I wasn't prepared to take on a lifetime commitment."

"Because you're not a man who enjoys commitment." It was not a question.

"You called that one right." The last time he'd allowed himself to get seriously involved with a woman, he'd ended up in prison. Gavin was not eager to repeat either experience.

"Yet my grandmother still entrusted you with her house."

He shrugged his shoulders. "I tried to tell her I wasn't the stick-around type. She didn't believe me."

"My grandmother was infamous for her ability to only see what she wanted to see." Tara decided, for discretion's sake, not to mention that Brigid's intuitive sense of people was very seldom

off the mark. “You haven’t answered my second question,” she reminded him. “What are you doing here in the middle of the night?”

“I was sleeping. Until you woke me up by collapsing on the porch.”

Tara rubbed her temple where a headache was pounding. “I don’t understand what happened.”

“From the crack that woke me up, and the sulfur smell when I opened the door, I’d say lightning struck close by. Probably one of the trees. I’ll check in the morning. I’d guess that the force knocked you down.” Leaning down, he brushed away the auburn hair that had fallen over her forehead and examined a rapidly growing lump.

When his fingertips stroked her skin with a slow touch that was meant to be soothing but in reality was anything but, Tara jerked her head away. “I suppose I should count myself lucky I wasn’t hit myself.”

“Definitely.”

The air around them grew thick with the scents of rosemary and yarrow emanating from the burning candle. Rosemary, Tara remembered, was used to weave a spell of remembrance, and love. As for the yarrow, Brigid had told her that if you put a sachet of it beneath your pillow, you would dream of your true love.

“You should probably get out of those wet clothes,” Gavin said when Tara began to shiver. “Before you catch cold.”

She was wearing a blouse the color of a buttermilk biscuit tucked into a pair of snug jeans.

“Good try, Mr. Thomas. But I’m not that naive.” Nor foolhardy.

“The name’s Gavin. And believe me, sweetheart, I was only trying to keep you from catching cold.”

The sparring helped. Helped clear her head and calm her nerves. “Aren’t you considerate?”

“That’s me,” he agreed with equal sarcasm. “Mr. Consideration.”

She should have been irritated. Instead, dammit, she was undeniably interested. “Well.”

She took a deep breath, then wished she hadn’t as she watched his steady gaze slip from her face to her breasts. She glanced down and realized the tailored silk blouse that appeared so staid when worn with her oatmeal-hued suit in the office had suddenly become far too revealing for comfort.

The material was clinging to her breasts like a second skin and her nipples had pebbled—from the cold, she assured herself—and were pressing against the wet silk in a way guaranteed to instill dangerous thoughts in just about any man.

“On second thought, I think I will change my clothes.”

“Good idea.” His unenthusiastic tone said otherwise. Although he truly didn’t want to be responsible for her catching pneumonia, Gavin found himself more than a little reluctant to surrender the view. When his gaze returned to her face and he viewed her poisonous glare, he knew she’d been reading his thoughts.

Since he was not accustomed to apologizing for being either human or male, he gave her wet shoulder a fraternal pat.

“Your overnight bag is still on the porch. I’ll go get it.”

He was back in a moment.

She’d managed, during that brief interlude, to regain a bit of composure. And caution. “If you don’t mind, Mr. Thomas, I’d like to see some identification.”

“I was wondering when you were going to think of that.” He reached into his back pocket, pulled out his billfold and handed it over. “You’ll find an Arizona driver’s license, American Express card, a couple of Visas and a Mogollon County library card. That should convince you I’m who I say I am.”

She glanced through the plastic-encased cards and lingered momentarily over one, thinking that it was unfair for any mere mortal to look so sexy in a driver’s license photo. His dark hair, swept back from his forehead, was disgustingly thick, his hooded eyes were so darkly brown as to be almost

black and his jaw could have been chiseled from granite. She decided that the cleft in that square chin was definitely overkill.

“You seem to be who you say you are,” she agreed. “But that still doesn’t mean I can trust you.”

“Your grandmother entrusted her house to me,” he said pointedly. “And there’s a letter waiting for you on the upstairs dresser that will undoubtedly vouch for me, as well.”

“She left a letter? For me?”

“It’s got your name on the envelope.”

“Why didn’t you send it to me?”

“Because I had my own letter instructing me to leave it for you to read when you arrived. Besides,” he pointed out, “it’s a good thing I didn’t forward it, since all my other letters appear to have gotten lost.”

Once again his tone told her that he knew she’d been lying. She would have been uncomfortable about that had her mind not latched on to another thought.

“Don’t you think that’s strange? Her death was so sudden, but she’d already written letters to both of us to be read after her death?”

“I did in the beginning. But then I decided she was just one of those people who likes to plan ahead. I’ve heard of people leaving instructions with their lawyers. Or letters in safe-deposit boxes.”

“I suppose that makes sense,” Tara allowed. “Since you were included, you must have been close to her.”

He shrugged. “She was lonely.” His tone was edged with a hint of censure she tried to ignore. “She didn’t have any family in Whiskey River, and I was a stranger here, as well. So, I guess you could say we kind of adopted each other.”

“Did she happen to mention to you what she did for a living?” Tara’s voice held an unmistakable challenge.

“You’re not talking about her mail-order herbal business.”

She folded her arms across her chest and met his gaze with a long, level look of her own. “No, I’m not.”

“She told me she was a witch. Since the fantasy seemed harmless enough, I didn’t let it bother me.”

“How open-minded of you.” She reached out and took the gray overnight case from his hand. “And for the record, Mr. Thomas,” she said as she headed toward the doorway and the stairs that led to her grandmother’s bedroom, “it wasn’t any crazy old lady’s fantasy. My grandmother was a genuine, card-carrying, crystal-gazing, spell-casting, druidic witch.”

That said, she swept from the room, leaving Gavin to wonder if lunacy ran through the genes of all the Delaney women. Or just the gorgeous ones.

Her grandmother’s bedroom was just as she remembered it. Cabbage flowers bloomed on the yellowed ivory wallpaper and the antique sleigh bed was covered by a quilt that had been in the family for generations. Celtic animals and geometric patterns echoed the stone carvings and metalwork of that ancient time.

She found the letter on the dresser, just as the annoying man downstairs had told her. The handwriting was a bit more spidery than she remembered, but there was no doubt that it was her grandmother’s. And even if she hadn’t recognized the delicate script, the energy emanating from the ivory envelope was unmistakable.

The paper was handmade, speckled with dried flowers and herbs from the garden, and carried the familiar lavender scent that Tara had always associated with Brigid. She inhaled the evocative fragrance and sighed.

“I’m sorry, Grandy,” she said softly. “I should have been here for you. In the end.” Instead, she’d continually put off her grandmother’s requests that she visit, leaving a lonely old woman to befriend the man downstairs. A man who was not only a stranger, but an obvious disbeliever, as well.

Feeling horribly guilty, Tara sat down on the thick feather mattress and began to read.

Dearest Tara,

If you're reading this, it means you've overcome your reluctance to return to your roots, at least temporarily. And although I have always understood your need to follow your own spiritual path, it saddens me that past circumstances have caused you to view the gifts you've inherited as a curse, rather than a blessing.

I realize how difficult this journey has been for you, darling Tara. And just as I cannot erase the pain you've suffered, neither can I promise instant miracles.

But what I do promise is this—if you stay beneath this roof for one cycle of the moon, your life will inexorably change. At the end of this time you'll be able to put the past behind you and move on.

You've already made the first step, Tara. Now I'm asking you to trust in your grandmother, who loves you, one last time. I promise you will not be disappointed. Blessed be.

The traditional words of farewell blurred through the mist of tears gathering in Tara's eyes. She had to blink to clear her vision in order to read the PS.

I know Gavin Thomas is not the type of man you're accustomed to. But since his arrival in Whiskey River, he's come to mean a great deal to me. In fact, I consider him almost like family. It would please me very much if you could open your heart to him, if only as a friend. His own road has not been an easy one. I believe you may find you both have much in common.

"Dammit, Grandy," Tara muttered, "this really is dirty pool. Even for you."

She glared up at a needlepoint-framed photo of her grandmother and was struck by a resemblance she'd never before noticed. Except for the fact that she had a time-saving, no-fuss haircut, she could have been looking in a mirror.

"I cannot believe that you're asking me to give up my life in San Francisco to move in here for a month, befriend an obvious nonbeliever, come to grips with my past and, oh, yes—you're not fooling me for a minute here—in my spare time I'm supposed to fall in love with your precious Mr. Thomas, which isn't going to happen because I'd rather kiss a toad."

As if possessing an energy all its own, the lie reverberated around the room until she could practically feel it bouncing off all the flowered walls. Tara closed her eyes and shook her head. It was impossible. She simply couldn't do it. Whiskey River held too many painful memories.

The thing to do was to spend the night here, since the idea of driving back down that twisting mountain road in the dark was less than appealing. By tomorrow morning, the storm would have passed and she could go to Kauai as originally planned, where she would spend the rest of the days she'd allotted for her vacation basking in the sun before returning to her uncomplicated life.

As impossible as others might find it, Tara could actually hear her grandmother's voice challenging that last thought.

"All right. So, in this case, uncomplicated may translate to boring," she allowed. "But it's what I like."

It was also, she admitted as she changed into dry clothes, what she needed. A boring, predictable, normal life.

She left the bedroom on her usual brisk, efficient stride determined to send Mr. Gavin Thomas back to wherever it was he'd come from.

Gavin had just started a fire in the stone fireplace when he heard her coming back down the stairs and inwardly cursed Brigid—not for the first time—for getting him involved with her house. And as if broken windows and juvenile vandals weren't enough, he now had her ill-tempered granddaughter to deal with.

"I thought you might have left already," she said pointedly.

There was no way he was going to leave her alone in this house, without power or a telephone, with those potential juvenile delinquents running loose, but Gavin decided to save the argument until he learned her plans.

“Actually, I was waiting around to hear the verdict. So what is it? Are you going to stay?”

“Not that it’s any of your business. But no. I’m not.”

He nodded. “I figured that would be your decision.”

“Now you’re a mind reader?”

“No. But I am pretty good at reading people. It only makes sense that if you had any deep feeling for the place, you would have come home before now.”

While your grandmother was still alive. He didn’t say the words out loud, but Tara heard them, just the same.

“Since you don’t know anything about me, it’s a bit presumptuous of you to pretend to understand my reasons for staying away.”

“Ah, but there’s where you’re wrong.” A log shifted, sending a shower of sparks up the chimney. He took a black iron poker and began rearranging the wood. “As it turns out, I know a great deal about you.”

“From my grandmother.” It was not a question.

“She talked a lot about you,” he agreed as he worked on getting the burning logs where he wanted them. “I figured a lot of the business and school stuff was typical grandmother bragging. But I was referring to more personal things.”

“Such as?”

He replaced the poker and turned toward her once again, enjoying the way her lips had formed into a sexy pout. “Such as the fact that part of the reason for your career success is that you threw yourself into your work after being stood up at the altar by that hotshot Montgomery Street lawyer.”

Ignoring her sudden sharp intake of breath, he crossed the room, picked up a bottle of brandy he’d brought with him and poured the amber liquor into two Irish crystal balloon glasses.

“She had no right to tell you about that.”

“Brigid worried about you. She thought you needed a man in your life.” He held one of the glasses out to her.

Tara took a sip of the brandy in an attempt to soothe her ragged nerves. Although it was smooth as velvet, and warmed her all the way to her toes, it did nothing to instill calm. Deciding the only way to tackle a man like Gavin Thomas was head-on, she tossed up her chin, determined to put a stop to this right now. Before it got out of hand.

“For your information, Mr. Thomas—”

“It’s Gavin,” he corrected.

“For your information,” she began again, “I have men in my life. Lots of men. More than I can keep track of.”

“Tara, Tara.” Gavin clucked as he shook his dark head with feigned disappointment. “What would your grandmother say if she could hear you telling such bald-faced lies?”

“I’m not—”

“Of course you are,” he smoothly overrode her protest yet again. “Look at you.” He eyed her over the rim of his glass. “You’re a lovely woman, but you insist on hiding any feminine attributes beneath that oversize shirt and baggy jeans.”

She wished they’d never gotten on to the unpalatable subject of her love life. Or lack of it. She also wished he’d button his own damn shirt. His chest, gleaming copper in the flickering firelight, was unreasonably distracting.

“Excuse me.” Frost tinged her voice, her eyes. “Perhaps I should go upstairs and change into my red lace teddy and hooker high heels.”

Oddly enough, although she was practically spitting ice chips at him, Gavin was enjoying himself. “As appealing as that might be, it would also be a bit intimate. Since we’ve just met. But you could loosen up just a little.”

He tossed back the brandy, then closed the gap between them. “Unbutton a couple of buttons so the collar isn’t choking you to death.” Without asking permission, he did exactly that. When his fingers brushed the skin framed by the now-open neck of her white blouse, Tara stiffened. “And next time tell the cleaners to go easier on the starch.” He frowned at the stiff pleated front. “A bulletproof vest would probably be softer than this.”

Her fingers tightened around the stem of her glass. “My choice of clothing is none of your business.”

“I suppose that’s true. In theory.” Gavin rubbed his chin. “But it offends my artistic sensibilities to see a woman working overtime to hide her beauty.”

Before she could respond to that outrageous statement, a sudden crash shattered the silence, followed by the sound of breaking glass.

4

TARA SCREAMED as the glass from the leaded front window came flying into the room.

Gavin shouted a raw, pungent curse and tore out of the room. She heard the front door open, heard his footfalls as he ran across the front porch. Her first coherent thought was that her grandmother was playing a trick from the world beyond. But blowing in windows wasn't Brigid's style.

She'd be more likely to call down the moon than try to terrify her granddaughter into a man's arms. Then Tara spotted the rock lying on the flowered carpet, a rock she knew that had landed there not by magic, but by very mortal means.

Suddenly concerned that Gavin was putting himself in danger just to impress her, she took off after him and arrived at the front door just as he was dragging two obviously terrified boys up the porch steps by their shirt collars.

"My cellular phone is on the table in the kitchen," he told her. "Call 9-1-1 and have the sheriff come out and pick these two up for vandalism."

"It wasn't vandalism," the larger of the boys insisted. "Not exactly."

Gavin shook him. "Look, kid. You purposefully broke a window, just for the hell of it. What would you call it?"

"A dare," the other boy insisted in a voice that sounded perilously close to tears. "Eddie Rollins double dog dared us to break the window. Said we didn't have the nerve."

"Since when does it take any nerve to throw a rock through the window of an abandoned house?" Gavin demanded.

"It takes a lot of guts," the other boy insisted. "Cause everybody knows the Delaney place is haunted."

"You sure about that?"

"The old lady was a witch," the boy answered. "Makes sense it'd be haunted."

"Haunted or not, it doesn't give you the right to go destroying property that isn't yours." He tossed them onto the porch swing. "Don't move." Then he looked up at Tara. "I thought you were going to call the sheriff."

"Do you really think that's necessary?" she asked, glancing at the two boys who were trying to look rebellious, although it was obvious that they were scared to death of this furious, glowering man.

"Dammit, lady, in case it escaped your attention, there's glass all over your grandmother's parlor floor. If you'd been another foot closer to that window, you could have some of those shards embedded in your face."

"I certainly wouldn't have enjoyed that." She folded her arms and studied the two young vandals again. "But I'm not certain that it's necessary to involve the sheriff."

"They've been pulling stunts like this for the past six months. It's gotten damn expensive replacing the windows and I think it's time they acted more responsibly."

"I'm all for responsibility." She paused. Her eyes slanted, she rocked back on her heels and chewed thoughtfully on a thumbnail. "But I believe that, along with having them pay for the damage, we can take care of this little problem ourselves, Gavin."

A ghost of a smile played at the corners of her lips. "Did I mention that I inherited many of my grandmother's powers?"

As angry as he was, Gavin couldn't help smiling as he followed her train of thought. "Actually, I don't believe that came up."

"Well, although they've definitely proven to be a mixed blessing, I did. Which I suppose, if one wants to be annoyingly technical, makes me a witch, as well." She flashed the boys the type of spellbinding trust-me smile that Gavin figured the wicked witch had used to lure Hansel and Gretel into her gingerbread cottage.

“I’m afraid I’m flat out of eye of newt, but I believe I saw some goat’s blood in the refrigerator. And some dried rattlesnake skin. And, of course, grandmother always kept chicken entrails in the freezer for just such occasions.”

She nodded, satisfied. “Yes, I think there are enough supplies on hand to weave a lovely black spell.” She leaned down and ran her hand over the top of the older boy’s head, ruffling his dark hair. “How would you like to be turned into a lizard?”

She flashed another smile as she turned to his companion. “With your pointy little ears, I rather see you as a bat,” she decided. “Tell me, dear—” she trailed her hand down the side of his face “—are you afraid of the dark?”

“Of course he’s not,” Gavin said, getting into the spirit of things. “After all, he’s running around out here in the woods in the middle of the night. I’d say he’s probably part night creature already.”

“That was my impression, as well,” Tara agreed. “So it’s settled.” She rubbed her hands together gleefully. “I do so love turning people into reptiles. And it’s been ages since I turned any boy into a bat.” She sighed. “I’d almost forgotten how much fun it is.”

“Want me to go light the Black Sabbath candles?” Gavin suggested.

“Thank you, Gavin. I’d appreciate the assistance. Oh, and if you wouldn’t mind, could you please get my cauldron down from the top shelf in the kitchen?”

“No problem.”

“Fine. Then we can get started. Ready for an adventure, boys?” She reached out, as if to take their hands.

“Well,” Gavin said as the boys streaked past them as if the devil himself were on their tails, “I’d say you settled that little problem. Although it’s a good thing you’re not going to stay. Because by this time tomorrow the word will be all over the country that Brigid Delaney’s granddaughter is a witch.”

“Perhaps I’ll have to tune-up my broomstick and buzz the courthouse before I leave.”

She was kidding, Gavin reassured himself as he followed her into the house. It was just a joke. Like the one she’d played on those kids.

Tara was standing in the middle of the rug, looking down at the pieces of broken glass. “It’s going to be difficult cleaning this up in the dark. I suppose it can wait until morning.”

“That’d probably be best,” he agreed. “There’s some plywood outside in the back. I’ll nail it over the window until I can replace the glass tomorrow. Luckily, I’m getting pretty handy at this.”

She glanced up at him with a surprise that he did not think was feigned. “Then you were telling the truth earlier? This happens often?”

“Often enough.” He rubbed his jaw. “You really didn’t read my letters, did you?”

“No.”

“Any special reason?”

“I don’t know.” She sighed as she decided there was no point in trying to convince him that they’d all gotten lost in the mail. “It’s difficult to explain.”

Gavin didn’t press her for an explanation. She didn’t sound all that eager to unburden herself, and frankly, he didn’t care why she’d chosen to stay away from Whiskey River.

“Relationships can get a little sticky in the best of families,” he said mildly.

“You can say that again.”

She appeared small and pale and vulnerable in the muted glow of the fireplace. Something stirred inside Gavin, something that felt uncomfortably like sympathy. Remembering all too well the last time he’d made the mistake of comforting a troubled female, he tamped down the feeling.

“I’d better go get that plywood.”

She’d sensed his interest. And his caution. She nodded, relieved he’d chosen to avoid the issue, but wondered at the edge of anger she thought she detected in his tone.

“Thank you.” She glanced around, noticing that the room didn’t look half-bad considering the house had been vacant for six months, and wondered how it would look in the bright light of day. “I’ll want to repay you for all your work.”

“That’s not necessary. It wasn’t that big a deal.”

“To me it is. You’ve done me an immense favor. It would be a great deal more difficult to sell the house if it’d been badly vandalized.”

“You’re selling?”

He should have expected it, Gavin told himself. Especially when she didn’t care enough to show up for her grandmother’s funeral. But for some reason, he didn’t like the idea of a stranger moving into Brigid’s house.

“I don’t see that I have any choice.”

“Everyone has choices,” he argued, unknowingly echoing Lina Delaney.

“Of course you’re right.” She lifted her chin, daring him to challenge the decision that had not come easily. “And since my work is in San Francisco and the demands of my career preclude my having a second home, my choice is to sell the house and invest the funds in my IRA.”

Gavin wondered if she knew exactly how much she resembled her grandmother when she stuck her chin out like that. Despite the fact that she’d been nearly three times his age, Brigid had been the most appealing—and frustrating—woman he’d ever met. And now it appeared that Tara had inherited both her appeal and her tenacity.

“I never knew a witch with a retirement account.”

“Known many witches have you, Mr. Thomas?”

“Gavin,” he reminded her yet again. “And your grandmother was the only one. That I know of.”

“Well, now you know two.” She flashed him a smile. “And this one definitely believes in financial planning.”

That siren’s smile, which he knew to be as fake as her alleged eye of newt, reached her eyes, making them gleam like emeralds in the shimmering candlelight. When he found himself unreasonably tempted to kiss her, Gavin decided it was definitely time to call it a night.

“It’s late,” he said when the green lacquered long-case clock suddenly announced the hour with a silver-belled minuet rather than the expected peal of chimes. “If you’ve been driving all day, you’ve got to be exhausted. Why don’t you go on up to bed, and I’ll fix the window.”

The soft feather bed was undeniably appealing. However...

“I don’t mind waiting until you’re finished.”

“I’m not going to attack you, Tara.”

Tara wondered what she’d said to earn such a dark and deadly look. “I didn’t think you were. It’s just that I wouldn’t feel right leaving you with all this work.”

Gavin reminded himself that if she’d never heard of him, she couldn’t know about his admittedly unsavory past. “I told you, I’ve gotten it down to a science. Go to bed. I’ll lock up and sack out on the couch, in case those kids come back.”

“As much as I appreciate the offer, it’s definitely not necessary for you to stay. I may as well get used to being alone.”

“I thought you were going to sell the house.” He’d assumed she’d list it in the morning, then hightail it back to her safe, comfortable, predictable life in San Francisco.

“I am. But surely Brigid told you about the condition she put on my bequest?”

“She told me she was leaving the place to you. And she asked me, if anything ever happened to her, to look out for it until you arrived. That’s all.”

She gave him a long look and determined he was telling the truth. “Although Brigid believed in people following their own stars, she never believed me when I told her that the life I’ve chosen is the one I truly want.

“So she stipulated that before I can sell the house, I have to live in it. For a month.”

“A month?”

“Thirty days to be exact.”

“Thirty days. Imagine that.” Things were definitely going to get interesting around Whiskey River, Gavin decided.

“Interesting doesn’t even begin to describe the possibilities, Mr. Thomas.”

Her smile at his surprise that she’d discerned his thoughts was cool and knowing. Gavin found it irritating as hell. “You didn’t read my mind. You just made an obvious assumption and got lucky.”

“Whatever you say,” she answered pleasantly. Then, possessing a bit of her grandmother’s flair for the dramatic, she decided that it was time to exit the scene.

“I’m suddenly very tired. I believe I will go to bed. Good night Mr. Thomas. Please remember to lock up when you leave.”

As she entered the bedroom, she stopped in front of the photograph of Brigid. “Good try, Grandy,” she murmured. “And I’ll admit he’s sexy, in a kind of rough and dangerous sort of way, but I’m not going to let myself get involved.”

Ten minutes later, after brushing her teeth and washing her face, Tara slipped between the flowered sheets and the antique quilt. When the scent of yarrow wafted up from the goose-down pillow, she tossed it onto the floor, squeezed her eyes shut tight and vowed that she was not going to dream of Gavin Thomas.

Despite her best intentions, the vow was broken as soon as she drifted off to sleep.

IT WAS THE SOUND that woke her. Tara froze, willing her body to remain absolutely still while her mind, lagging behind, struggled to leave the misty, sensual dream.

Her heart was pounding so hard and so fast in her ears she had to strain to hear the sound. But there it was, a strange scratching noise at the window that reminded her of a movie she’d seen on late-night cable last week. Dracula, she remembered, had made that same sound against the glass just before flying into his victim’s bedroom.

Don’t be ridiculous, she scolded herself. That was only a movie.

She slipped from between the tangled sheets. Although she assured herself that it was only her over-stimulated imagination, she refrained from turning on the bedside lamp for fear of drawing attention to herself. She padded stealthily to the window in her bare feet, took a deep breath and jerked the curtain back.

Then laughed as relief flooded over her.

“It’s only a tree branch, dummy. Scraping against the window. Geez, you’d think you’d never spent a night alone.”

Feeling much better, Tara went back to bed. As she drifted back to a sleep filled with Gavin Thomas, she didn’t hear the faint creaking of floorboards over her head.

In the morning, Tara was relieved to discover that Gavin had obviously gone back to wherever it was he lived after boarding up the window. After a restless night, filled with vivid, disturbingly sensual dreams, having to face him first thing in the morning would have been too much to handle.

She searched the cupboards, frustrated but not surprised when all she could find were the herbal teas her grandmother had so successfully marketed through various catalogs. And as much as she had enjoyed the lemon balm tea with her mother the other day, what she needed now was a strong jolt of caffeine to rid her mind of cobwebs and lingering thoughts of a man she had no intention of becoming involved with.

Despite her grandmother’s interference.

Deciding the only thing to do was get dressed and go into town for coffee at the Branding Iron Café before meeting with Brigid’s lawyer, she went back upstairs to take a shower.

“I realize your talents far surpass mine, Grandy,” she muttered out loud as she blew her hair dry. “But if I wanted to, I could cast a spell of my own. To counter yours.”

“Of course that’s also what you want me to do, isn’t it?” Tara frowned at her reflection in the wavy bathroom mirror. “That’s what all this is about. You’ve brought me back here to force me to get in touch with my roots. Well, I’ve got news for you, Grandy. I’m not going to cast any spells. I’ve made a life for myself that doesn’t involve magic. I’m happy.”

The falsehood hung in the air, mocking her. “All right, perhaps satisfied is a better word. But it’s only because I’ve had a grueling year. By the time I leave here, I’ll be itching to get back to work.”

Back to her tax tables and interest rates and stock indexes. Back to her tidy apartment on Russian Hill, decorated with no-nonsense Scandinavian furniture, where she spent her nights and weekends laboring over computer spreadsheets.

“I’ve worked hard to get where I am,” she insisted as she marched into the bedroom and for the second time that morning almost tripped over the suitcases that had not been there when she’d gone to bed last night.

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