



Senna Fisher

BOOK ONE OF THE AGAINST THE ODDS SERIES

# Against the Odds

***Against The Odds***

***Senna Fisher***

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## Chapter 1: Prologue

Felicia looked around her as she walked in the Ferncliff Forest. Her stride was hesitant and afraid. It was so dark in the forest that she was startled by the rustling noises of the leaves blowing softly in the wind around her. Her torch composed murky, ominous shadows against the darkness of the night, which captured her vivid imagination. She shivered as she felt a cool breeze whisk through her shawl.

Then she heard the slow, intense flapping of wings moving towards her, just a few paces behind her. She looked around and saw nothing.

“Olivia, is that you?”

There was no reply, so she walked faster, bumping into shrubs and roots. She got to the clearing and was consoled by the clean, fresh air of the openness. She swung her torch around to see if anybody was there, but saw nothing except the muffled silence of the night air. She relaxed slightly, thinking she had allowed her imagination to run away with her. *Okay I am alright. Where is Olivia?* She was to meet Olivia here at the clearing at midnight. It was fifteen minutes passed midnight already.

Felicia had been late because her husband, Samuel, had taken so long to fall off to sleep. She had rushed here, hoping Olivia would wait for her. Olivia did not seem like a patient woman and might have already left. She was not sure if she was disappointed or relieved. If Olivia had already left, she would not need to go through with it. *But if she is still on her way*, she sighed deeply. *I am going to do it.* Felicia was unsure what to do next. She had come this far, she reasoned to herself, so there was really no harm in waiting a bit. *Fine, I will wait for half an hour, then leave. But I need to relax because every sound is giving me the creeps here.* She took a deep breath and closed her eyes. She jerked suddenly when she realized she was not alone. There was definitely something in the forest. She felt she was being watched, peered at. She casts her eyes suspiciously across the bushes around her, hoping to identify the source of her suspicion.

She turned around and jumped when she heard the cold, harsh voice behind her.

“Well, you took your time, didn’t you?”

Olivia was standing directly behind her, so close that she could feel her breathing into the nape of her neck.

“Olivia, you gave me such a fright! I did not hear you coming. I am so sorry I am late, but...”

“No matter, let’s get to work. I don’t have the whole night. Come.”

Felicia felt the cold, dry hand grab her. She followed Olivia and as they walked, she realized that she had made a mistake. She should not be here. She should be at home with her husband and her two-year old daughter. She had been motivated by anger and jealousy, and now, finding herself in the forest at midnight with a black witch, she was sure she should just call it off. She realized she had been wrong to come here tonight, particularly as she was scared of the Olivia she saw now. She looked different now with her long black dress and no shoes, her green eyes gleaming dangerously in the moonlight. Her voice had a menacing tone which she had not detected when she had met Olivia in town. She had been a soft-spoken woman with a pale green dress, which had made her eyes light up beautifully when she smiled.

Olivia stopped suddenly. "Sit down there while I prepare the ritual."

Felicia sat obediently and Olivia disappeared into one of the bushes. *It is odd that she never seems to make a sound as she walks*, Felicia reflected. Olivia emerged from the bushes carrying a bag filled with herbs and black candles. She placed the candles in a circle around both of them and lit them. She moved from candle to candle, sprinkling some of the herbs, while she chanted a string of words Felicia did not recognise. One giant candle was placed in the middle of the circle, facing both of them. Felicia felt the gravity of the ritual and its dark force closing in on her. She wanted to say something, to stop the ritual, but Olivia seemed unaware of her presence. Felicia cleared her throat, but Olivia glared her into silence, her eyes dark and hostile and her lips pursed tightly in disapproval. She pulled out the lock of dark hair. She held it over the flame and chanted:

*Winds of the North, East, South and West*

*Call to my behest*

*The Angel of Darkness, Angel of Pain*

*That he may serve my purpose once again.*

Felicia felt that cool breeze again and Olivia paused for a while.

*Angel of Darkness, Angel of Pain*

*Thank you for your presence once again.*

*Give me your power*

*So that I can shower*

*Pain and suffering to young Portia McGuire.*

*Let her beauty attract much desire*

*That burns like a flame in a fire.*

*That such desire be turned away in fear and pain  
That she will not know if she is sane.  
Let her beauty be known to all  
Who in time will turn and fall  
Away from her in fright  
At her beautiful sight.*

*Angel of Darkness, Angel of Pain  
Increase her pain  
With a binding of all the allies and runt  
Born of Portia McGuire, to bear the brunt.  
Let this spell be so bound  
To invoke the evil sight and sound  
Of The Darkness which will give no love, joy or celebrations  
to all the allies and runt born of Portia McGuire for many generations.*

*Let this spell be unbound and apart taken  
Only by the energy of the power of love which remains unshaken.  
Let its power to drained and extracted  
Only by the power of two Protectors, together contracted*

*Winds of the North, East, South and West  
Grant to me my request  
So mote it be.*

Olivia took the lock of hair and burnt it in the flame. It sizzled and struggled against the engulfing hunger of the flame, but Olivia's fingers held firm until all the hair was burnt. There was a strong stench of hair and herbs which clung in determination to the air as she spoke to Felicia.

"Now there. It is done. Portia will never have your husband or any other man."

"I don't know. Olivia, can you reverse it? It seems a bit harsh."

"No, we can do nothing now. This was your desire. You came to me and pleaded with me to stop her and that is what I have done. Nothing more can be done. Go back to your husband."

She turned and collected her bag and walked off into the bushes.

Felicia stumbled out of the forest, frightened by the suggestive sounds of the night. She was sure there was something following her home, but she saw nothing except the darkness of the night. She was also frightened by what she and Olivia had done. What had she done? She had been completely angry when she had approached Olivia for help to magically keep her husband from other women, especially the handsome Portia. Now Olivia was talking about *generations* of pain for Portia? She shrugged, telling herself that the idea was ridiculous and it was nothing more than Olivia being dramatic for her benefit. She got home and could not sleep, consumed by guilt for what she had done to her friend Portia.

For two weeks she tried to find Olivia to reverse the spell, but she seemed to have vanished. Felicia comforted herself with the thought that it was not real. *It is only magic after all. Nothing can possibly happen.* She chided herself for being silly about the whole thing, and convinced herself that nothing really happened out there. She was fortified in this belief when she saw Portia that week. Feeling a little worried and guilty, she had gone to visit Portia to check if everything was fine. She had been greatly relieved to see that Portia was still as vivid and beautiful as ever, laughing joyfully as she always did. Felicia felt much better and dismissed thoughts of Olivia from her mind.

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Olivia walked off into the forest with her helper, The Darkness. Its wings flapped overhead as she walked and she smiled gleefully. She had waited a long time to perform that spell. It had been in her family for generations and she had never found a willing participant to work with her. She had travelled far and wide, hoping to find the right person to submit to the spell. Felicia, with her naive insecurities about her wealthy and dashing handsome husband, had been easy to convince, especially because her friend Portia was so vibrant and beautiful, with an open friendliness that had surprised Olivia when she met her. It had not been difficult to get Felicia to cut a lock from her friend's dark hair. Olivia knew Portia would not steal the girl's husband, but it had not been difficult to suggestively persuade her of such a horrendous reality. Olivia was so happy. It had gone extremely well, her best work yet. She rubbed her hands in satisfaction. *Now I*

*can go back home to my family and friends. It has been such a long time. She took the next train from Rosen Bay and slept all the way home to Dunville, relaxed and content. The Curse of The Darkness had finally been cast in the Ferncliff Forest.*

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## Chapter 2

On Friday Rebecca walked up the stairs to her office and rushed as she heard her phone ringing. She scrambled through her handbag to find her keys, but battled to find them amidst her lipsticks, pens and paraphernalia. She threw her hands up in the air. *What the hell. Let it ring. Who could be phoning me so early in the morning anyway? It is only 7.15.* But the phone continued to bid her to it and rang persistently for her attention. It stopped abruptly just as she threw herself across her desk to answer it. *Damn!* She sat down and stared at her computer. She sighed. It was going to be one of *those* days. She was so distracted lately. Perhaps it was all the tension growing inside of her. *Something is wrong.* Ever since she looked into those deep blue eyes, her chakras were out of balance. She could not shake the feeling, the anxiety, premonition, or whatever. Something or someone was nagging her, tugging at her and she did not know what it was about.

Rebecca remembered the day well, just two weeks ago. It had been Monday. She had gone to the Department of Justice and Constitutional Development on Victoria Street to meet her friend, Jonathan Carlton, who had recently been employed there as a legal adviser. Jonathan had been excited about starting the new job because as he had been getting depressed with his private practice which dealt mostly with criminal work.

When she arrived, Jonathan was busy on the phone and she had walked out onto a large terrace to get some fresh air. It was a bright, sunny day and she wanted to savour its splendour. She closed her eyes and took a long, deep breath. She relaxed, walking further onto the terrace and turned when she heard a man's voice. He was sitting on a bench nearby, talking on his cell phone. His back was facing her and all she could see was that he had broad shoulders and very short, dark brown hair cut in a neat military style. He was mumbling and agreeing with the caller. She decided she should leave before he saw her. Suddenly he turned and faced her, his dark sunglasses sparkling at her. He stopped talking and looked at her.

Then he spoke again. “Yes, I am paying keen attention. Go ahead and impress me,” and a slow smile curled on his lips.

She wished he could take off his sunglasses, because she felt compelled to look at his eyes. She continued to stare at him and noticed that he was in his early thirties, had a great body and was definitely mocking her. She liked the light shadow of stubble on his chin and she thought it made him look like he just got out of bed. She turned to walk away when she heard him.

“I’ll call you back. There is something that I need to attend to now. Hello, are you lost? Are you looking for somebody?”

He had gotten off the bench and was standing when she turned. He was tall and his body seemed to overshadow her. He was leaning down, his dark sunglasses glaring at her. She watched his lips as he spoke, bizarrely fascinated with his perfect teeth.

“I, ur, am, ur, waiting for Jonathan Carlton. He is busy on the phone.”

“Oh? Jonathan? And what do you want with him?”

“He is friend. I will wait inside for him, thanks.”

“I think you should wait for someone else, my dear. Jonathan is a married man, did you know that?”

He sounded disappointed and disapproving. She stared at him, unable to answer and offended by his suggestion. He took off his glasses and looked at her with bright, blue eyes. Their eyes locked in confrontation and she looked away abruptly, because she heard Jonathan calling her name. She turned and walked towards him as he was coming onto the terrace.

“Hello, my princess. I thought you got tired of waiting and buggered off. I know how you hate to be kept waiting. I’m sorry. I will definitely make it up to you. Oh, hi Clayton. I didn’t see you there.”

Jonathan was suddenly aware of the tension between them. “I take it you two have met?” He smiled at Rebecca and noticed that she looked a bit confused.

“I guess. Anyway, let’s get a move on. I have so much to do today.” She tried to escape, but she heard his voice.

“No. We haven’t met. Hello, *Princess*, pleased to meet you. I am Jonathan’s colleague. I am Clayton Giles. Don’t forget what I told you, okay?” His eyes were smiling at her, but there was something else in them that she could not read. He seemed disturbed? He held out his hand to her and she was compelled to be civil.

“Yes, pleased to meet you. Now, Jono, we really must go. Bye.”

Jonathan was surprised at what he observed. Clayton was behaving strangely. He had that look of disapproval on his face, but he was also being unusually charming. He had little time for women and focussed most his testosterone on winning legal challenges. He hardly noticed all the pretty young women who vied for his attention and generally adopted a dismissive attitude towards females. He had not seen his old friend's eyes sparkle like that since they were at university together. Also, he could have sworn that the two had already met before he arrived, but seemed not to know each other's names. Rebecca had been uncharacteristically rude. She was usually lively and charismatic to strangers.

He watched Rebecca as they sat down at lunch, the distracted way she rubbed her hand, looking confused. "Rebecca, are you okay?"

"Yes, of course. I like your office. It feels welcoming and cozy, except, I am not too sure that I am happy about your secretary. Does Jackie know that she is a busty, sixteen year old blond?"

Jonathan laughed. "Yes, Jackie knows Sharon. She chose her for me. She is not sixteen. She is twenty-five and a very competent blond, I will have you know. She also has a busty, blond girlfriend. I suspect that is why Jackie chose her."

"Oh, all right, then. I feel better already. What kind of work have you been doing so far? Have you been doing anything interesting?"

"No, not yet. Most of the work has been pretty mundane so far. I am dealing mainly with corporate contracts, or rather tender processes. The government has recently become obsessed with contracts awarded only after a lengthy tender process. So that is what I am dealing with at the moment. Rebecca, you cannot believe how stress-free it is in there. I can't believe my luck. I even have time to go to the gym, if you have noticed. I have four attorneys working for me and they seem to know what they are doing."

"Great. You are so lucky. I wish I had less people working for me. I am going insane with all their fights and bickering. It is pretty hectic right now. I certainly have not been to the gym in a *long* time. Tell me about Jackie's new project."

They chatted for a long time and three hours later, they made their way back to his office where she had left her car. On the way, Jonathan suddenly said, "so what do you think of Clayton?"

"I don't know. I can't really say. I only met him for a few seconds."

Jonathan was intrigued. Rebecca was a strongly opinionated woman. She always had a firm view of what she thought of people, especially after her first meeting. She had a strong instinct about every one and he had relied on it on many occasions when they had worked together.

“He is a great guy. Very gentle, but very assertive. I met him many years ago. He is Jackie’s friend. He is fiercely protective over her and never trusted me with women. He used to give me such a hard time if I even looked at a woman. Eventually, he accepted that I loved Jackie and relaxed a lot. Now, *she* complains that the two of us are bad for each other.”

Rebecca said nothing and he dropped the subject. *Interesting*, he thought.

At his office, he gave her a hug and she went to her car. She went back to her office, unable to shake the unease that had enveloped her since she had looked into those blue eyes.

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Clayton was furious with Jonathan. *What is he doing having long lunches with beautiful women? Who is she anyway?* He looked at his watch. It was now three in the afternoon and he was not back yet? *Where is he?* He looked out at the parking lot and saw them. Jonathan was hugging her and she was laughing. *How dare he flaunt this woman? Has he gone mad? No, maybe I have gone mad.* He realized how his jealousy was getting the better of him. He realized that he wanted her to be hugging him instead and wanted her laughing at something he had said. Those black eyes haunted him, the way they had stared at him in fascination and fear, the way they had locked him into a space he could not recognize or define. He felt like he knew her, but when she had shaken his hand, there was no familiarity there. Her hand had been warm and soft, as if needing his protection. *This is ridiculous*, he thought. She was just one more woman who wanted to be entertained by men. She had been very bossy with Jonathan, with her ‘I have many things to do’ attitude. He liked her husky voice, though. *Clearly, she has been busy with Jonathan.* Jonathan hardly ever went out to lunch, hating business lunches. He always preferred to have a sandwich with Jackie who came over regularly and chatted to him. Her decorating business was just around the corner and she often came over to their office to have lunch with her husband. *Where is Jackie today, anyhow?*

He went over to Jonathan's office and found him on the phone. He was talking to Jackie and heard him say, "I only got back a few minutes ago. She said to say hello and good luck with the Fischmer project."

*Okay, so she is not his lover.* He felt so relieved by this information that he surprised himself with this revelation. Jonathan noticed him and motioned him to come in.

"Yes, interesting thing happened. She met Clayton. Believe it or not, he was charming. Can you figure that?"

His eyes were laughing at Clayton and he roared with laughter at something his wife said. "I *did* ask her what she thinks of him. Very interesting."

He was enjoying Clayton's discomfort and smiled at him. "Say hello to Jackie," and handed over the phone to him.

He walked over to the window and watched Clayton. He seemed a bit tense. He was usually relaxed and comfortable, but today he seemed like he had a wasp buzzing in his head.

Clayton eventually put down the phone.

"Your wife says you are cooking tonight."

"Yeah, I know. She is very busy these days, so I will be cooking every day for the next two weeks. Bummer. Clayton, you look uptight, everything alright?"

"Yes, of course. I am just a little tired I guess."

"Come over for supper on Wednesday to relax. Rebecca will be there. She loves my cooking."

"Who?"

"Rebecca, you know, the woman you met earlier?"

"Oh, the princess. Let me see if I am available. Who is she, Jono?"

"Dear boy, you can ask her that yourself on Wednesday."

"Is she an ex-lover of yours?"

"No. She worked with me on a number of cases. I am surprised you never met her. She is good friends with your drinking buddy, Brad Adcock. He loves her to bits. She is a bright woman with a heart of gold. Sexy too, don't you think?"

"No, I didn't notice. We were only there for a few seconds before you arrived. Brad never mentioned her. They are lovers?"

"I doubt it. I know he relies on her a lot for her opinion in some cases, and he is very protective over her. I don't know if there is something else."

Jonathan smiled when Clayton left. *He did not notice that she was sexy?* That was the weakest lie he had ever heard Clayton speak. He also noticed how his jaw clenched when he asked about her relationship with Brad. He went back to work and soon forgot about the interesting encounter between his dearest friends.

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Clayton had not forgotten the woman. Hours later, he was haunted by the dark eyes. He remembered clearly how he had known that she was there, before he had turned. He had felt her presence and smelt the slight hint of jasmine blowing towards him. He had known that there was a woman on the terrace, but had been shocked by his reaction when he had seen her. She was standing there, as if ready to flee, a short black skirt barely touching her knees. She had great legs and her long black hair had swayed gently towards him as if beckoning him to her. Her eyes had looked straight at him and warmed him all over. She did not smile at him and he remembered how desperately he wished she would smile.

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Rebecca had also not forgotten the bold, blue eyes that had teased her, taunting her to combat and the strong hand that had sent shivers down her spine. She tried to dismiss these thoughts. After all, he was a good looking man. In any event, it was no use. There was nothing she could do about it. Even if he was interested, he would soon turn away, like the rest. She knew what she had to do. She had to wait patiently for the Protector. He would come soon and clear away the force that prevented her from finding love. There was no point in lusting after this man. It would be a total waste of time and the pain would be unbearable.

The night was quiet and Rebecca felt despair. She heard it, getting louder, the hissing, insistent sound, its wings flapping slowly in rhythm. The Darkness was back again. She heard a noise at her window and knew it was watching her. There was nothing for her to do but to light her white candles. She burnt the sandalwood incense and shouted.

“Away with you Darkness, there is nothing for you here!”

She chanted these words and felt its force getting weaker, until it was a faint whisper.

*Why has it come tonight?* It only came to her when she was with a man or when she was in love with a man. It had no reason to be threatened. *Why now?* She pondered this question as she fell asleep. She woke up tired the next day, exhausted from the energy of

banishing The Darkness. She hoped it would not plague her this week when she was so busy.

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### Chapter 3

On Wednesday she dressed carefully for dinner at Jonathan's house. She changed so many times that she could no longer decide whether she looked good or not. She eventually settled for her jeans and a t-shirt.

Jonathan and Jackie were chatty and friendly, but Clayton said very little. He seemed an elusive man and she spent a great deal of the evening avoiding his blue eyes. Eventually, Jonathan asked her to turn on the music. She went over to the hi-fi, crouched on the floor and put in a CD. Her t-shirt moved up her back and a butterfly tattoo at the bottom of her back was visible. She got up and smiled.

"There, some sophisticated music for you unrefined sods!"

Jackie was laughing. Jonathan smiled, but Clayton did not smile. His face was white, frozen in shock. He just sat there, staring into space.

"Clayton, are you okay? I told you he was acting strange this week." Jonathan looked worried.

"I'm fine, thanks. I was just distracted for a moment."

When it was time to go home, Clayton arose with her and left with her. Outside, he stared at her.

"Who are you, really? Why have you come into my life? What do you want?"

She stared back at him, hurt and stunned by his attack on her.

"I don't want anything from you, you arrogant swine. Who do you think you are? Get a life!"

"Don't lie to me. Why do you have that butterfly tattoo? Why?"

She looked at him astounded. It had been the symbol that had protected her from harm for so many years. She had forgotten about it and was amazed that he seemed to recognize it. Was he part of The Darkness? Is that why, after she had met him, it had come to her, in the depths of the night? Is that why she had been captivated by his blue eyes? Why her hand had itched long after he had held it? She stared at him and knew she needed to get away. She walked quickly to her car, not daring to look back. *Who is he?*

Rebecca went home, determined to clear her chakras and speak to Nana. Nana had been dead for some five years now and she missed her grandmother so much. Today, she

needed her, wanting her wisdom and comfort. She had so many questions to ask. Rebecca disconnected her phones that night and sat at her altar to meditate. She could feel the tension leaving her body and she began to relax. She lit some frankincense and white candles, and called to her Nana:

*Nana, Nana, it is I, Rebecca who speaks  
It is your wisdom I seek  
Where in my world and sector  
Is The Protector?  
Who might he be?  
So I can bring him unto me?  
Nana, Nana, Rebecca seeks your help free  
So mote it be*

She shut her eyes for a while and then went to bed. Nana always came to her in her dreams and she hoped tonight would not be different. Later, while deep in her sleep, her Nana came. She felt the strong wave of warmth that filled the room and saw her. She looked so beautiful, floating gently in the wind, her red hair so short and crisp. *Where is this place, Nana?* She could see many tall buildings, but none were familiar to her. She saw a harbor close by with ships moving gently to shore. Nana turned suddenly and behind her emerged a white tiger. Nana was not afraid. She smiled, as if inviting it. The tiger moved slowly, carefully, untroubled by the buildings around it. It moved in circles around and she realized that she was in the center of its circle and focus. It did nothing but pace around her.

Then Nana spoke, her voice soft and musical.

*He holds the power in the palm of his hand. Do not be afraid my child. He is here. He will protect you.*

The images faded and Rebecca realized that she had been awoken by the hissing of The Darkness. It had come to disturb her dream. It dawned on her that it knew that the Protector was close. For one thing, she recognized the Rosen Bay harbor, which was about three miles from her home. So it was clear to Rebecca that the Protector was in her city. The Darkness seemed to appear more powerful these days, its hissing fast, furious and booming. It tapped on her window again and she chanted her banishment words to it. It took a long time before it finally left.

Rebecca was confused by her Nana's images. *What is a white tiger? What does it mean?* She knew that Nana had always applied *feng shui* in her living and it meant something. She knew that the white tiger sometimes symbolised unexpected events. *Is this the case here? It is also a cat. What do cats mean in dreams? The home, responsibility or sex?* Rebecca played the dream over and over in her head, but was no closer to the truth. Her mind wandered to Clayton and his accusations about her butterfly. There was too much confusion for her now and her mind drifted back and forth with conflicting and confusing images. She slept with a strong feeling of despair and hopelessness. She was twenty-nine years old and was still looking for her Protector, still battling with The Darkness and still confused and frightened by the animal images. Where was he, her Protector?

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## Chapter 4

Clayton was horrified by his outburst after dinner. He wanted to go to her and talk to her, but she was clearly afraid of him now. Her eyes had been flashing at him in anger and fear. He tried to phone her a few times, but she refused to take his calls. He had even tried to phone her at about seven that morning, hoping she would be there. *What had made me say those things? Perhaps it was the shock of seeing the butterfly again.* It had jolted him back to the life he had worked so hard to forget.

Clayton had married his best friend's sister, Suzanne Bridges three years after he graduated from Law School. He was just twenty-five years old, eager to take on the world. Suzanne with her bright smile and spiky, blond hair had intrigued him for so long. She had taunted and tormented him with her flirtation and he had been grateful when she had eventually agreed to date him. He loved her wild and dramatic poetry and had learnt a long while ago not to ask 'what is it about, exactly?' She had been cute, funny and playful. Her brother Barry was his roommate and had not been happy about them dating and later marrying. He often told Clayton that they were too different, that he knew both of them well enough to know that they could not fulfil each other's needs. But neither Clayton nor Suzanne paid any attention. They were drunk with the arrogance and power of their youth. She loved his quiet, sober ways and his dark and determined passion to protect the innocent. She loved his inflexible values and principles and found them comforting in her intangible, ever-changing world of poetry.

Clayton, determined to save the world, had joined a firm of attorneys which dealt with many indigent clients wanting to enforce their constitutional rights. He loved the work and was greatly fulfilled each time he beat the government or some large corporation. He was driven by this passion and could not appreciate Suzanne's concerns about their financial security. Her poetic exploits brought in very little money and as the years past, she wanted the full suburban lifestyle that her brother, a corporate lawyer in their father's firm, enjoyed. She often felt ashamed and fearful when they met at Barry's house, with its massive garden, swimming pool and gazebo. She would not accept that Clayton had no desire for such things and felt like a very wealthy man in his work. She learnt to hate their two-bedroomed apartment, with its tiny balcony and noisy streets. She hated not having her own car and most importantly, she learnt to hate Clayton's inarticulate clients who did not have the civil decency to phone during office hours. They were growing apart and things did not improve on Clayton's thirtieth birthday.

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Suzanne had organised a party at an expensive restaurant in Bateman Road and had invited her family. Her mother fussed over her the whole night and Clayton felt slightly irritated by the party and his mother-in-law's fussing. His mood had not improved when his father-in law had followed him to the bathroom.

"Clayton, my boy, we need to talk about your future. Suzanne needs you more now and I think it would be wise if we talk 'man-to-man' so to speak. Are you available for lunch tomorrow?"

Despite his better judgement, Clayton replied.

"I can't see that there is much to discuss, but I will be happy to meet you tomorrow."

He had left the bathroom feeling weak and silly, knowing he should have said, 'no, I am not available. I don't want to work for you.' But he did not have the courage or energy to fight the old man once again.

On the way home, Suzanne was particularly happy and chatted about everything. At home, she said, "welcome to our poky home. Happy birthday, my love. I have a wonderful surprise for you."

Clayton had smiled, thinking about all the ridiculous presents she had bought him over the years, art by a 'soon to be famous' painter or sculptor, boxing gloves to help him cope

with stress, bright, cartoon shorts he would never wear, and the like. He was not enthusiastic about this present, given her history on the subject. And he was right.

“Clayton, I am so excited. We’re pregnant!”

She was beaming and jumping around as she told him this and he simply stared at her in stunned silence. Clayton was not happy. They had discussed the issue of children before they were married and had agreed that they would not have children. They have never discussed it again once they were married.

“At least now we can move out this place and get a real home. I spoke to my father and he is willing to take you into his firm. Isn’t this wonderful? Clayton? Are you okay?”

Clayton said nothing. He glared at her and then left the apartment. He needed to think. All this was too much. He went over to Jonathan’s house. Jackie was there alone and they talked for a long time. It was difficult for Jackie to be sympathetic, as she had tried to fall pregnant for years. She tried to understand Clayton’s anger, but could not.

Clayton went back to the apartment, feeling betrayed and alone. He had never wanted children. His own parents had been cold and hostile to each other and to him, and he saw no joy or reason to bring another child into the world. He was trapped, because he knew that Suzanne would insist that they move and ‘give the baby the best’. This translated to him leaving his work to do corporate or criminal work. Suzanne was waiting for him and they had an argument again. It was the same argument, that he was not adequately providing for her, that their lives could be better. He felt tired and bored. What was the point? He was stuck with this now. He agreed to all her demands.

After meeting her father, it was agreed that he would join the firm in six months’ time, by which time Suzanne would be eight months’ pregnant. They had clearly mapped out his life and he had submitted. Clayton felt dead inside, but Suzanne seemed oblivious to this. She continued her art and her body started growing beautifully. Clayton savoured his last months at work and vigorously pursued all his cases. He worked day and night, because he could not bear to leave his clients, or to go home to Suzanne.

One night, it was eleven in the evening when he heard his office phone ringing. He ignored it, because he knew none of his clients knew he was there. It had to be Suzanne. He switched off his cell phone, knowing she would phone him on that number. Tired but satisfied, he went home at about two in the morning. Suzanne was not there. There was no note from her and he panicked. Had something happened to her? He went to the phone and

saw that there were a number of messages. His heart stopped when he heard Barry's desperate voice.

"Please, Clayton, Suzanne had an accident. Call me as soon as you get in."

She was in hospital, her head in bandages and her face badly swollen. When she saw Clayton, she cried. "I lost our baby, Clayton. I lost our baby."

He tried to comfort her, but he felt numb. Everything was happening in his life and he had no control over it. He told her to try to get some rest and told her everything would be fine, but he felt nothing at those words. He stayed at her bedside and must have fallen off to sleep. He was awoken by a nurse and he discovered that Suzanne had died while he had slept.

He remained confused and numb and simply allowed them to take him to another room. He tried to get his head around the events of the night. His wife had been in a taxi which had an accident. She had a head injury, but seemed okay. She was to have tests the next day to check that all was well. She had seemed alright when she spoke to him. She had lost the baby. These were the facts for him. When her mother and father arrived, they were hysterical. They blamed him for her death and told him that if he had been at home she would not have taken a taxi and would not have been so desperately lonely that she had wanted to visit her brother at eleven in the night and she would not have needed to leave the house. It went on and on.

It was only after Suzanne's funeral that Clayton began to experience emotions again. He felt ashamed and guilty and he missed her terribly. He remembered how he had ignored her since she told him she was pregnant, how he had deliberately hurt her by shutting her out. He regretted that he had not talked to her or been there for her during those months. He had been selfish and pig-headed. Throughout their marriage, he had insisted that they live and love on his terms. His shame was sharpened by the realization that, at the hospital, when she spoke to him, a small part of him was relieved that the baby had died. He hated himself for having thought that. He was an animal, a cruel, evil animal and Suzanne had not deserved that. He missed her noise and her complaining and felt cold and lonely in the apartment. He tortured himself every night with pain, guilt and grief.

It was during these months that the butterfly had appeared to him. He knew he saw it, but could never figure out if it was all in his mind. He liked the way it flew playfully around

him and always felt like it spoke to him. Every night, he sat in the lounge, thinking and feeling. Every night, it would appear. It seemed to know when it was needed and he thought he must be going mad.

That is exactly what Jonathan told him when he explained about the butterfly.

“Clayton, maybe you need to get some professional help. I am your friend and it worries me that you are now talking to a butterfly that does not exist.”

Clayton refused, because he feared it would go away and he would be alone again.

He was grateful for Jackie and Jonathan’s support, love and caring, but he wanted the butterfly to comfort him every night. He needed it. Ironically, for him, it was the ‘imaginary’ butterfly which kept him sane.

It was seven months after her death before he was able to go to her studio and look at her work. Brad Adcock has coaxed him patiently and kindly through those months, trying to make him get some closure. Brad’s brother had died and he understood grieving. Brad had eventually pushed him to take some action after a drinking binge when Clayton could hardly remember his name.

He walked into her studio and smelt the familiar spicy perfume she wore so generously. He packed her belongings and gave her books to her friends and family. Her family had never forgiven him and he was saddened by the loss of his friendship with Barry. He carried her diary home with him and left it on the table. What should he do with it? Should he throw it away, or give it to her brother? What was the point? He was pondering this issue when the butterfly arrived. It seemed restless today and not playful. He wondered what it was thinking, or feeling. *Do butterflies have thoughts and feelings?* It seemed so much like a gentle person to him that he believed it had thoughts and feelings. It suddenly landed on the diary on the table and fluttered its wings vigorously.

“What, my beauty, what is it?” Then it was gone.

Clayton woke up in the middle of the night with the realization that he should read the diary. Hesitant at first, he decided that his butterfly was telling him something and he was right.

He read her words and discovered that he had not known the woman he had been married to. He read her accounts of her affairs, her descriptions of him as a failure and her general contempt of him. He read how she would have plans and schemes every time she wanted something from him, how she had got money from him to buy present for her lovers, and an array of things he would not have thought his precious Suzanne was capable

of. Her descriptions of violent sex with Aaron, a sculptor, made him throw the diary away in disgust. From these readings, he developed a disdain and mistrust of women. His guilt faded and his anger rose. Driven by this fresh revelation of the female race, he threw himself into his work with a renewed vigor. He promised himself that he would never be fooled by a woman again.

He had never imagined he would see the butterfly again. It never returned after the day he read the diary and he had often wondered what had happened to it. He never dreamt that he would see it literally on some woman's flesh. He remembered how it had soothed him during the dark, painful months after Suzanne's death. He had missed the butterfly and had felt a sense of loss for a while, but he had eventually convinced himself that he had been hallucinating in his grief. It had been a terrible shock to see it, seemingly so alive, against that woman's skin, as if it always belonged there. As she had moved, for a split second he imagined that it moved with her. That is what had shocked him the most. The feeling that the butterfly belonged on her, with her. If that was so, who was she? Why had it been there to soothe him, heal him and help him through his darkest hours?

~ ~ ~ ~

He tried to phone Rebecca a few times, but she refused to take his calls. He was growing desperate. But a part of him saw the futility of his quest. What would he say to her, that it was *his* butterfly on her back? She would laugh at him. Perhaps he was over-reacting. There was no reason to believe that anything significant or coincidental had happened. She was just a woman with a butterfly tattoo. He was being silly and should apologize to her. Also, he wanted to look into those black eyes again, to drown in their power. He wanted her, he finally admitted, butterfly or not. But a small voice in his head reminded him of a unique feature of the butterfly. It lacked a small patch of color on its left wing. It was a missing color that was so conspicuous against the bright blue of the butterfly. The small colorless patch resembled an hour-glass. Hers had been exactly the same with its missing small hourglass patch.

He phoned Bradford Adcock in the hope he would get some answers.

"Hey there. How are you doing?"

Brad was pleased and laughed. "Well, well, if it isn't the lawmaker himself. How are you doing Clay?"

“Fine, like I was last week when we spoke. I really have been fine for a while. Don’t forget we are meeting on Friday.”

“Yes, yes. I know.”

“I just need some information, about a friend of yours. Rebecca Raymond.”

“Oh sure, you need her help?”

“No, no. I met her with Jono and I am curious.”

Brad was silent for a while.

“She is not a woman to mess around with. Seriously, Clay. She is very dear to me. She is a really great psychologist and definitely not one for you to mess around with.”

Clayton laughed. “Okay, relax, I get it. But she is not your type either, so I am surprised. But I will back off.”

“Clayton, I have no sexual intentions with her. She is that one, you know, that special woman that deserves a decent guy. Yes, I admit she is very hot, those breasts just call to me and when she swings those legs and strides off, I admit I get.....”

“Damn, Brad, I really don’t want to hear that.”

Brad sighed. “I like her, as a person. What exactly do you want from her?”

He was silent for a while. “I don’t know. There was just a connection, you know, like we knew each other. I want to know who she is. There is just something....”

Brad was silent for a long time.

“Okay, she is a child psychologist. She deals mostly with kids who can’t cope, with life, with family with school, you know? She helps a lot of my divorce kids, and she is my best expert witness. She’s sweet, caring and gets on well with most people. She doesn’t date lawyers, *at all*.”

“I see. So you have never tried?”

“No. The first time I met her, I did kind of suggest it and she sweetly told me to remain professional for our mutual benefit. I guess I liked the way she handled me, and now, we just chat, or have a drink occasionally.”

“Okay, fine, thanks. I will try that too. See you on Friday.”

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## Chapter 5

Rebecca was tired. Friday was always a long day for her. Today, she had spent most of the morning dealing with one of her favourite patients, Carl Swain. He was a five-year-old boy who, because of the accidental death of his brother while horse-riding, had developed a sleeping disorder. She worried about this small, intense boy and had gone over with his parents to the fateful stables. It had been a trying morning and Carl was no closer to overcoming his anxiety about the horses. His parents had been disappointed and she had gone back to her office feeling a dismal sense of frustration. She looked at all her messages and tried to call back all, except one, Clayton. He had left many messages in the last two weeks, but she had never been able to call him back. She did not want to discuss her butterfly or anything with him.

She looked at her diary and was further depressed at the prospect of spending the next hour in a partners' meeting. The firm, made up of eight partners of psychologists, was starting to get unruly. Perhaps they should not have brought in the two new partners from the public hospital. They were proving to be exceptionally difficult and did not seem to understand the vision of the firm. They were fixated with their working hours and did not regard their patients as special. They simply treated each patient as an inconvenience. They also seemed to get into a lot of trouble with the administrative staff, who did not like their 'superior' attitude. There had been many arguments and fights in the last two months. They would invariably come to the meeting, argue about petty things, like who would do their photocopying, and make no meaningful contribution to their discussions. Perhaps she would raise her concerns about Carl to deflect them from arguing, and anyway, she needed help. That had been the reason for working from the same place, each of them bringing in specialist skills and knowledge. She had spent a few years in a single practice, but, given all the work she did in court, she had felt pressurised to bring in a partner. It had been her friend, Jessica, who specialized in educational therapy, who had suggested they get a team together. It had taken them two years to finally find appropriate partners and suitable premises. All six of them had enjoyed the support and friendship the firm provided. The introduction of the two new general psychologists had tipped the balance. This was aggravated by the fact that Tim did not seem to understand that he could not sexually harass the administrative staff. He seemed to think that they were all at his 'pecker and call' as her secretary, Denise often said.

The meeting, however, had been less painful than she thought. Jessica had met with the two earlier in the week and seemed to have gotten through to them. She went back to her office to prepare the evidence she would be giving in a domestic violence case for one of Jonathan's former colleagues.

Denise had gone off on a lunch date with some young man who worked in the florist shop close by and Rebecca welcomed the silence in her suite. As much as she liked Denise, she was noisy and bustling when there were no patients. She seemed to move in and out of Rebecca's office to stop herself from being bored. The rest of time she entertained herself with guessing what was 'wrong' with the patients. She would study them, their clothes, demeanour, and any other characteristics so that she could conclude that they suffered from some compulsive or obsessive disorder. She was never close to the truth, but her guessing kept everyone entertained.

There was a light tap on the door and Tim popped his head in. "Your appointment is here. Your secretary does not seem to know what time your appointments are. She has gone to lunch. She has written nothing in the book. Shall I let him in?"

Rebecca was puzzled because she had no appointment that afternoon. "I am sure you are mistaken. I have no appointments now. Perhaps Jessica or Ralph?"

"No, Princess. It is only you that I seek."

There he was, looking dashing in a dark blue suit and smiling with those blue eyes.

"Clayton!" She got up and he took this as an invitation to pass Tim and come in.

"Thanks Tim. Clayton is a friend of a friend, not a patient. Please come in."

Her heart was beating fast at the sight of the blue eyes, watching her as she squeezed her hands together and tried to look comfortable. He seemed to fill the room, which was decorated with toys and teddy bears and rainbows on the wall. He took his eyes off her and looked around the room.

"I decided that since you would not answer my calls, I would come see you. I was quite willing to be a patient." He was smiling. "Perhaps I might need your services soon, according to Jono."

"Yes, I'm sorry about that. I have been very busy."

"Liar," he said and looked right into her eyes.

"Where is the infamous couch, where I can unburden all my deep, dark feelings to you?"

"I work almost always with children and they sit down there. So if you wish, please feel free." She pointed to the beanbags on the floor. He laughed and she simply looked at him.

“What did you want to talk to me about?” She waved her arm to the ‘parent’ chairs.

“I wanted to apologize for the inexcusable way I behaved at Jono’s house. It was totally unwarranted. I guess I was feeling tense.”

“You do seem to make habit of accusing me of things. I find it rather disturbing.”

“I know. I really want to make it up to you. What do you desire?”

His eyes has become darker, a rich dark blue, but his face was still smiling.

“Nothing. Thank you for coming over. Really, it is alright. It is not as if we are likely to meet again.”

“Why do you say that?”

“We both have known Jono and Jackie, or rather Double J, a long time and we have never met. I can’t see why it would be different now. I don’t socialize with their legal friends. I find it tedious when they ask me all sorts of analyses about their clients.”

She was trying to talk to disguise her nervousness. She did not like the fact that she did not feel in control right now. He was standing there, casual and comfortable, while her stomach was doing somersaults as he looked at her. It was just unacceptable.

“I feel really bad about the way I behaved. Can’t I just take you to dinner or a long lunch? I promise I will accuse you of nothing.”

He had tilted his head slightly, pleading, but not quite.

“Okay, perhaps we can meet for lunch. When are you free?”

He smiled in a slow easy way, like a Cheshire cat that got the cream. He had not expected her to say yes, she realized. *Damn! I should have been sharper than that*, she chided herself.

“Now.”

“What?”

“Now, I am free now. So, let’s go for lunch.”

“Well, but I have to be back...”

“No, Denise told me that you are free this afternoon. Yes, don’t look so surprised. I phoned so many times for you, that Denise and I have become friends. She has been most helpful.”

“Oh, I will deal with her later. Alright. Let’s go.”

“We are going to Monet’s. Jono says you like it there.”

“Have you got the whole world conspiring against me?”

He threw back his head and laughed.

~ ~ ~ ~

Rebecca was feeling a little frustrated. How could he be so calm when she felt out of control? He made her nervous and jumpy, while he calmly went about his business. She was also surprised how different he was to what she had expected. For one, he drove a standard Dodge Calibre, a functional car. She had expected something more flashy and large. At the same time, he wore expensive tailor-made suits, which did not fit the image. Jonathan had told her that he was a famous constitutional lawyer and that was constantly offered money and status in large firms, but he had refused. He had also been sought for prestigious political appointments. He sounded like a good lefty, but he looked like a corporate lawyer. He was neat and precise, both in his appearance and his movements. When they got to Monet's he was very charming and friendly, as if he went there often, but she was sure she would have remembered if she had seen him there. He chatted amicably with her, about the world and random things. He spoke a little about his work. Rebecca watched in total enthralment. He was handsome when he smiled. He was not mocking or teasing her today and she liked his relaxed manner.

"Clayton, what is it about your work that makes you enjoy it?"

He looked at her for a long moment, his blue eyes glowing.

"It is about who I am, I suppose. I enjoy the challenge of beating big corporate firms when they try to bully ordinary people. I used to have a firm which only did that kind of work. I really enjoyed it there, but I eventually found that I had to work for the government to make real change. I love the fact that I protect the innocent from the bad. It sounds very simple, but that is exactly what it is. Also, I guess my ego enjoys the feeling of dependence and power I get when I help people. I enjoy it most of the time. Other times I am just too tired. Do you understand?"

"Yes, of course. It makes perfect sense. You are very lucky to have the opportunity to do what you love. Most people never do. Most of our patients' biggest problem is that they never seem to be able to do what they love. They simply go through the motions of living."

"Hmm. And you Princess. Why do you do what you do?"

"I like the children and like you, I like the power to be able to help or protect them. I used to do general work, until one day I helped a little boy get away from his abusive father. It gave me a wonderful sense of pride and achievement. So I started working with

traumatized children. Of course, that meant I also had to give evidence in court. That's how I met Jono. I also will never have children and I act as a surrogate mother to these kids. I..."

"Why not?"

"Why not what?"

"Why won't you have children?"

"Ur.., I can't explain. I don't really want to answer that question. Let's talk about something else."

He was silent for a while, deciding whether to insist, but he realized that it was a painful subject for her, so he left it alone. *I will get it out her someday.*

"Jono wants to do something different for their anniversary this year. Any ideas?"

"I don't know. Jackie is complaining that they never go away, so I am sure she would like to go away somewhere to celebrate. But Jono will complain that he sees her all the time anyway and all he is doing is the same thing, but without his home comforts. I'm sure he will prefer a party with other people. He likes his male bonding sessions."

"Yes, I guess you are right. That's perfect."

"What's perfect?"

"That they go away somewhere with all their friends. A nice getaway. That's a good idea, Rebecca."

"I didn't say that!"

"Ah, but that has to be the answer. This way they both get what they want."

"All right, I suppose so."

"Yes. Make sure you are available on weekend of the twenty-third. It gives you two weeks to keep the boyfriends away."

"No way. I do not socialise with Jono's legal friends. I keep away from the lawyers outside of work. That is probably why you and I have never met before."

"Jono does not socialize with many lawyers. Most of his friends are in fact from Jackie's world. He likes the arty type. Apart from me, I am sure there will be no lawyers there and I promise I will not ask you to analyze anybody."

"I don't know. Speak to Jono about that first."

"I will do. But keep the weekend free, especially since Monday is also a public holiday."

"Okay, okay."

They chatted about other things and eventually left Monet's at four that afternoon. Clayton was not in a hurry to get anywhere and when they got to her office, he followed her inside the building. Denise was sitting at the front desk, eyeing him curiously.

"Denise, this is Clayton. I gather you have spoken on the phone."

"Yes, I am so pleased to meet you at last."

She was smiling and gushy to him and was trying to work out why her boss had refused to take calls from such a dish, who, according to Tim, called her princess. He was so sexy and charming that she giggled at everything he said to her.

"Yes, Denise, I am extremely pleased to meet you. You have been a kind and sympathetic soul to me. I am most grateful."

He lifted her hand and kissed it. Denise was so thrilled.

"Come along, Mr Charmer. Let's go before the gossip starts." Rebecca whispered to him.

"I am afraid I must go. Princess is demanding my attention."

He laughed at Denise's wide eyes.

She shut the door as soon as he was inside.

"Thanks a lot. I can imagine the stories that will be made of this. Would you like some coffee?"

"No, I must be going back to my office. I will speak to you soon, okay?" and he was gone.

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Clayton was disturbed by his desire for this woman and his strange behaviour when she was around. More importantly he was concerned by his bizarre need to touch her. He wanted so desperately to touch her back that it drove him crazy. He was also disturbed by the strong emotions he experienced when he was around her. He had almost felt her pain when she spoke about not having children and he had the urge to protect and comfort her. This was not his style at all. He had never discussed his passion for his work with any women except Suzanne and she had never understood. Here was Rebecca, a stranger, and she had needed no real explanation. He had been touched by her understanding of him and who he was. *I am being silly. She is a psychologist. That is what they do, listen to people.* His attraction to this woman was affecting his brain. He had gone there just to apologise, but had found himself unable to leave. The story he had concocted about Jonathan's anniversary surprised him. All Jonathan had said as that his anniversary was in two weeks'

time. He had built an opportunity for himself to see her again. He had better confess his sins to Jonathan fast. This was not his style. He had long learnt that his 'love them and leave them' attitude towards woman was perfect. They did not bother him with lies and manipulations and he did not bother with them at all. After sex was home time, neat and simple. Jonathan called it his 'hit and run' strategy. He was trying to reason with himself about these things when he passed Jonathan's office.

"Hey, lazy bones. Where have you been? Lorraine is going crazy looking for you. It seems you went out for a few minutes and didn't return. So who is your new lover?"

"Lover? No, I was just distracted."

"Lorraine is convinced that there is some woman keeping from work and that I know all about it. She tried your cell phone a zillion times."

"Oh, she worries too much. Jono, I need to speak to you, okay?"

"Yes, but I am going to meet Jackie at the Craft Centre in about two minutes. Why don't you join us? We haven't seen you there for quite a while."

"Sure, I will be there a little later. I am meeting Brad for drinks there, so I guess that is perfect. Let me go and sort out a few things first."

He went to his office, where Lorraine gave him an earful about not telling her where he was going, but he was not listening. He told her to go home and that seemed to keep her quiet. She was caring, but sometimes it got to him, because she treated him like one of her four kids.

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## Chapter 6

At the Craft Centre, Jonathan and Jackie had clearly been talking about him. They had that guilty look he knew so well.

"Hello Clay," Jackie hugged him tightly. He liked it when she hugged him like that, because she only did it when he needed it. She had always understood him and had taken care of him and he loved her for it.

"So, who is the lucky fish who gets you to play hooky?"

"There is no-one, I promise Jackie. The problem is that your husband only thinks about sex. I spent the afternoon with Rebecca."

They were flabbergasted.

“Our Rebecca, the one who refuses to speak to you?” Jackie was surprised.

“The very same. I went over to her office to apologize, but we got talking and then we went out for lunch. We talked for a while and before long, the afternoon had slipped away. Don’t look so shocked. I was completely civil and it was quite pleasant.”

“Pleasant, Clayton? Don’t give me that. Nobody spends hours at a lunch which is ‘pleasant’. Come on, give us the details.”

“No, it was nothing like that. I admit it was different, but not in the way you are thinking, Jono. She is a very unusual woman and I like being with her. I like who I am when I am with her, you know?”

“Clay, what is going on?” Jackie was not to be side-tracked.

“Okay, I don’t know. I can’t really explain, but, there are these things that excite and disturb me about her.”

They were silent as he spoke about his desire to touch her, protect and how he sometimes felt her pain. They were too stunned to interrupt. Clayton was not a romantic man, so they had no comprehension of the way he was speaking about Rebecca.

“It is all disturbing and strange. I don’t really know what is going on. I do stupid things. By the way you will be having your anniversary at some sexy getaway with a couple of friends.”

“Clayton, you have lost your marbles? What are you on about?”

“It sort of came up in conversation, while I was plotting how I could get to see her again without being pretentious. We discussed it and that’s what we came up with.”

“Clayton, while I do not accept your sex-driven motives, I think you are on to something. Jackie, why didn’t we think of that before? A lovely getaway. You get away and I get to keep my friends. Clayton, you and your girlfriend are very clever. Hmm, I like it very much.”

“J darling, keep quiet. Let Clayton finish his story. Will she agree to come with us Clay?”

“My dear. That is where you come into the picture.”

“Ah... a woman’s work is never done. I am to convince her?”

“Yes, but I think she will come anyway.”

“I doubt that Clayton. She is a closed, elusive person. She is not big into parties and social events. Anyhow, she called you an arrogant man and such like things. She was not pleased with you.”

“Yes, an arrogant swine that must get a life. I know. She told me.”

“No. no. It is worth a shot, Clay. After all, you just spent the whole afternoon with a woman who told me she would never speak to you again. Why did she agree to go anywhere with you? Clayton, did you threaten or blackmail her?”

“Oh Jackie, don’t be so melodramatic.”

Clayton laughed. “I simply asked nicely. I admit I was surprised by her response. I expected her to have me removed from the building. But she was very sweet and polite.”

“Yes, I wonder why she even spoke to you. She is a calm, rational woman, you know.”

“No darling, not where he is concerned. There is nothing rational about talking to a man who accuses you of having his imaginary butterfly. That is completely strange. Also, Clay didn’t you accuse her of having an affair with Jono?”

“Well, yes, it was a misunderstanding....”

“No, there is nothing rational about her at all. She should have given you the boot. You have behaved poorly. She must feel so intimidated.”

“She is not the type to be intimidated. She is very strong and professional. Every fool has tried that with her in cross-examination and she simply talks, as if she is discussing the weather. Pompous Paul really hates her. He tries to push her, frighten and threaten her and she just looks at him like he needs help. *He* is the one who leaves the court room feeling intimidated. So your accusations would not have bothered her much.”

“But, it *was* my butterfly. I am sure about that. It really shook me when I saw it.”

“Clayton, have you ever considered the possibility that it is just a common species of butterfly that anyone might have?”

“Yes, of course I did. I went onto the Internet to try and find it. It does not exist. Anyway, it is different because it has one small colourless patch. I tell you, it was the same butterfly. It was a complete shock to me that my butterfly on some woman’s butt. I wanted to know where she got it from.”

“Did she ever tell you about it?”

“No, because I was being rude and offensive and she swore at me. That is where it ended.”

“Why don’t you simply ask her? She might know about butterflies and can tell you where to find them.”

“No. I am not telling some psychologist about my ‘communications’ with a non-existent butterfly. She will have me committed.”

They laughed at the description of his dilemma.

“Clay, you did say it was *your* butterfly just now. But I guess it sounds crazy when you say it like. I am seeing her tomorrow. I will ask her about the butterfly, okay Clay?”

“Yeah, okay. I really want to know about it.”

“But Clayton, what does it mean? You think you saw a butterfly a few years ago and she has the same species. What does it matter?”

“My friend, I don’t know. I just need to know.”

Clayton went home feeling light-hearted about being able to talk to his friends about these disturbing events. They had not cleared the issues for him, but it was good to at least talk without them ridiculing him. His drinks with Brad had him laughing and joking, and enjoyed the causal banter of Brad’s colleagues who took his mind off Rebecca for a few moments. Brad was watching him cautiously a lot of the time, but he never mentioned their conversation about Rebecca. Clayton was not ready to have that discussion. He was beginning to think he had lost his mind. She had that effect on him. He was stronger in his conviction about one thing: that was *his* butterfly he had seen and it meant something. Anyway, he was glad that it was with her. It had been kind to him and it would be kind to her. He went to bed, warm with feelings of her, her dancing eyes smiling at him.

~ ~ ~ ~

When they left, they were a little concerned about their friend. This butterfly business was surfacing again. Jonathan thought it came up when Clayton felt stressed or trapped, and it made him feel better.

“I don’t even know if she has it on her butt as he says. Think about it Jackie. We were there when it happened. Why did we not see it?”

“Oh Jono, because you are not in lust with her. Clayton would notice any part of her body. Don’t you remember how you would peek at my breasts every time I leaned over? That is lust. You miss nothing.”

“Fair enough, we might not have noticed. But you must accept that there is a possibility that he was just hallucinating, that he was associating her with the butterfly. He said it had comforted him. He also said he liked being around Rebecca. Do you see? There is no butterfly. It is in his head.”

“But if she does have the butterfly, what does it mean?”

“That it is a common species, of course, or even a rare species. It does not matter. It means nothing. This is all crazy. What about Rebecca?”

“Yes?”

“What must she be making of all this?”

“Yes, dear, but she has not resisted him. That is the most interesting part.”

“Poor Rebecca, what she must be thinking!”

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## Chapter 7

Rebecca could not concentrate on anything. She packed her bags and went home. On the way, she thought about how she wanted him, how sexy he was and how he made her laugh. She had been completely mesmerised with the passionate way he spoke about his work. She truly liked him, with all his contradictions. She smiled when she thought how he had a small splat of blue ink inside his hand. Here he was, neat, tidy and precise in his style, but he never noticed that he had ink on his hand. But she worried too, because he did not touch her or try to touch her. Most men would at least find some excuse, but he did not. It had been so strange, the way his eyes would change from icy blue to dark blue when he spoke. She wished she could read his mind, or his eyes. She wished so many things.

But by the time she got home, the cold really of her situation dawned on her. It was only 4.30 in the afternoon and she could feel The Darkness. It was definitely getting stronger. It had never appeared before dark before. She went inside and tried to banish it, but it took her two hours before she felt its power weaken. *What has sparked this sudden brave strength?*

She phoned her parents, wanting to be comforted.

“Sweetpea, how are you? Your mother has been going crazy. She is worried about you. What is the problem, Sweetpea?”

“Oh Dad, you worry too much. I am fine. I just wanted to chat. How are things with you two?”

“We are fine. What is going on with you?”

“Dad, I am fine. I have been a bit busy and concerned about one of my children. Dad, I am curious. Where does my butterfly come from?”

“Why, Sweetpea?”

“Just curious, I guess. I haven’t seen one like it and a man saw it on me and recognised it.”

There was a long silence.

“I don’t know, baby, but ask your mother. Here she is.”

“Mum. Are you alright? Dad says you have been worrying.”

“Yes, of course. It’s just that I have had an odd feeling lately. Also, Nana keeps coming to tells us about a white tiger. I was afraid for you.”

Rebecca recognised her mother’s fear and guilt. She could never forgive herself for bringing a child into the world to carry such a burden.

“Oh, Mum, don’t worry about that. I asked her to help me find out who he was. She also told me about the white tiger. I have no idea what it means. Also, I did have a weird experience today. It came to me in the afternoon while I was coming from work. It seems to be getting stronger. It took me hours to get rid of it. That’s what must have been worrying you.”

“Oh, my baby. Get a pen. I will give you a recipe for a special bath. It should keep it at bay for a while. What’s this about your butterfly?”

“What country is it from? I met a man who recognised it, so I just wondered.”

“That is impossible, dear. He could not have recognised it because it does not exist. Theresa made it up especially for you. It had to be unique, so It could not identify it or figure out its magic. He must have seen something similar. Okay, take down this recipe. You must use this bath every night until it gets weaker, okay?”

Rebecca listened to the instructions and felt a lot better. She had been starting to believe that Clayton was on to something about the butterfly. *Okay, so he is not from The Darkness. Great. But what?*

She went to bed feeling a little sad. She would have been very happy with him, if things were different. That night, there was no Darkness and she slept peacefully after a long time.

~ ~ ~ ~

George and Rowena Raymond did not sleep well that night. They chatted till the early hours of the morning.

“George, there is no way he could have recognised it unless he is the Protector. He has arrived. I am sure.”

“But, honey, why did she not recognise him? The first time we met, we knew. I knew that I was to protect you the moment I set eyes on you. Why does she not know? And him? Why does he say nothing?”

“Because, this time it is different. Everything has been different. It never came to me when I was alone or in the daylight hours. George, it is getting stronger. Maybe this time, love will not win. Maybe this is the end. Our baby could be the last.”

“Come now, dear, things have been different. But Rebecca has coped very well. She has managed to use her life to help others. Do you think we should bring him to her?”

“No. They must find each other. We don’t know what will happen if we interfere. It might harm her or him. We just don’t know, George. What can we do to help our baby?”

“I don’t know. Perhaps we should go to her. I know she must help herself, but my baby does not need to be alone. Something is different. We can’t leave her alone, Rowena.”

They decided that they would visit her. The next morning they left their home in Mayville and drove into the city to see their precious baby.

~ ~ ~ ~

Rebecca was not surprised when her parents phoned to say they were coming to visit her for a few days. They must have been worried about her after that conversation. She was quite pleased because she would not feel so lonely with her thoughts. When they arrived, she saw the worry lines on her mother’s face and hugged her tightly. Her father was very relieved to see his daughter. He made her turn around, like he always did when she was a child. It made him feel better when he saw all of her. They spoke and settled in and Rebecca felt like a pampered child. Her father wondered around her garden, while her mother made herbal bath potions for her. It was so lovely to feel like a child again.

When Jackie arrived that afternoon, they chatted to her and she seemed to like them. She liked her mother, with her bubbly smile and clever words. Her father said very little. Then her mother said, “Rebecca, your father and I have been thinking. You must bring more of your friends over. I will cook for them. How’s that?”

“Oh Mum, that is not necessary. Just relax and enjoy the stay.”

“We would like to meet some of the city folk and the cooking will be fun for me. Come on. What do you think, Jackie? Dinner, tomorrow?”

“I think that it very kind of you to offer, Rowena. Jono would be delighted. Thank you.”

“Fine. You, my dear, must decide who else to invite.”

Her parents left the room and Jackie smiled.

“She is a wonderful woman, Rebecca. Don’t look so horrified. It makes them feel young and special when they treat you like a child. You must learn to indulge her. It won’t be too bad, I’m sure. I love the way they talk with their eyes. It is so intimate.”

“Yes, but also very frustrating. When I was a child, I would ask for something, they would ‘discuss it’ and then turn to me and say ‘yes we agree’ or ‘no, not at this time’. I would get so angry because I couldn’t argue with their silent discussion. It drove me mad and it would make them laugh.”

~ ~ ~ ~

When Jackie left, she went straight to her husband.

“Well darling, she does have a tattoo. I didn’t even have to ask. She was wearing shorts and a cropped t-shirt. It sat proudly on her back. It was definitely Clayton’s butterfly. What do you have to say about that?”

“I’m surprised. She does not look like the type to sport a tattoo. Why is it ‘definitely Clayton’s butterfly’?”

“Because, my dear, the missing colour patch is exactly as he described it, long ago, *before he met Rebecca.*”

He scratched his chin for a while. “I don’t know.”

“We are having dinner with her parents tomorrow night. They are a very strange couple. They talk to each other with eyes. It is quite beautiful to watch. Jono, it is truly magical.”

“Now *that*, I’m sure is your imagination.”

“Okay, you will see.” She turned and left him there. He was being so stubborn about all these things. He was so rational sometimes.

~ ~ ~ ~

Rebecca was relaxing in the garden talking to her mother when the phone rang. Her father, close by, rushed to answer it.

“Hello.”

There was a short silence.

“Hi, can I speak to Rebecca?”

“Yes of course. I am George, her father. Who are you?”

“I am a friend, Clayton.”

“Oh, Clayton, my boy. Rebecca is having friends over for dinner tomorrow, will you come?”

Rebecca was furiously waving her arms at her father to stop, but he promptly ignored her.

“I don’t know. I had better speak to Rebecca about that.”

“Okay, here she is now, bye.”

“Hello?”

“Princess.”

“How are you Clayton?”

“Just hold on. I need to get rid of an inquisitive father first. George, go away.”

“I am fine, thanks. I phoned to see if you could do something tonight, but you are clearly busy. What about another time?”

“Since you behaved so well the last time, no accusations.... well yes. How about coming for dinner tomorrow?”

“If it is alright with you. I don’t want to intrude.”

“It’s okay, really. Double J will be here. Jono could do with the support. Also, my father will never leave here until he meets the man who phoned me. So save me, please!” He laughed at her.

“Okay, but only as a favour. It does not count. We will still do something in the week. Is that a deal?”

“Deal.”

“Rebecca, I really enjoyed lunch yesterday. It was very pleasant. Thank you.”

“Yes, it was.”

“Okay, I will see you tomorrow. Bye.”

Her parents were both sitting on the couch in the lounge now, conveniently needing some shade. They were having one of their conversations.

*George, did you do that? Bring him here?*

*No, I thought it was you. I was about to chide you for that.*

*You should try, honey!*

“Oh stop it you two. Don’t do that. Just speak if you want to.” Rebecca’s voice was trembling.

“Sweetpea, what is the matter?”

“Oh Dad, I really like him. I can’t bear the thought of it all going wrong. He is a great guy. What will I do when he turns on me? I can’t bear it.”

“Rebecca, you must not think about that. All you can do is enjoy the pleasure and company you can have with him. Nobody ever knows if a relationship will work out. You just have to share what you can with him. Don’t think about it.”

George was torn between his strong urge to comfort her and say *but darling, he is the one, he will be there* or to fill her heart with empty promises. He chose the empty promises.

“Just enjoy what you can. You never know what will happen.”

It was so hard for him not to tell her, but he knew that it would put her and the boy at risk. Also, there was the possibility that he might not be the Protector or might fail to protect her.

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## Chapter 8

Jonathan and Jackie arrived at the dinner party first and Jonathan liked George instantly. He could see that he was a strong, powerful man who loved his daughter very much. He also liked Rowena, because of the arty, vague air about her. She had a beautiful smile, which, when she was young, must have driven the men wild. Jonathan talked to George about some famous case in the press and they enjoyed their legal dialogue. *What a normal couple. What is Jackie on about? They are sweet and caring and funny.* That is what he thought, until Clayton arrived.

The first strange thing that happened was that George Raymond excused himself and went to the door before Clayton rang the bell. It had been subtle, but Jonathan, experienced in observing human behaviour, noticed it. He stood at the door, waiting for the bell to ring and then opened it. The next weird thing that Jonathan ever saw was Clayton.

Clayton stood at the door, looking at George. Jonathan was not sure, but Clayton made a sound like a lion. Then he moved slowly to the side of George and his eyes changed colour to white-blue. He looked like a lion trying to stalk prey. *God, what is wrong with him?* Jonathan thought he saw Clayton’s hair rise slightly. *No, it is not possible!* Then George let out a deep sigh and Clayton instantly relaxed and smiled. He tilted his head slightly, like a pampered cat and his eyes were normal again.

“Clayton, my boy, good of you to come. Join the men. We are talking law. I believe you are also a lawyer?”

“Hi. Pleased to meet you, George. Perhaps I had best speak to the ladies first.”

George patted his shoulder and laughed. “Astute play”.

Clayton walked over to the ladies and greeted them. Jonathan was watching him. *Was that my imagination? He seems so normal now.* But he knew that his wife had also seen it. She stared at Clayton like he was about to attack her and moved back from him slightly. *So I am not mad.* He was sure that Rowena had also seen it, because she also stared at him, transfixed. It was only Rebecca who seemed not to notice. She had her back to the door when he had arrived. She chatted to him and he was as charismatic as ever.

Jonathan was very confused. What was wrong with Clayton? He did not seem to know how to behave around Rebecca. It was most inappropriate to growl at a girl’s father, especially at a first meeting. *What impression does he think he is creating on the girl’s parents? Honestly, Clayton needs to grow up.* Jackie was going to have a field day with him with plenty of ‘I told you so,’ especially because she also had been right about the older couple. He had seen them have one of their conversations. He wished he could hear what they saying, because it had been lively and animated.

Jackie was, of course, completely enthralled. Her desire for intrigue had been ignited. *Wow! That was amazing. What is Clayton doing? How did he do that? Does he know that he did that?* She looked at him and he seemed so normal again. *Roaring like a lion? Well, there is a lot more to this man than I ever dreamed. Jono must not even try to deny he saw that.* She had seen him, just as transfixed as she had been. Also, when Clayton had eaten the fillet steak with such desperation and hunger, Jono’s jaw had dropped. Clayton rarely ate meat. He had been a vegetarian most of the time he was married to Suzanne. *At least Jono has the decency not to say something about it. This is really crazy.* Only Rebecca seemed unaware of these goings-on. She had not seen Clayton, which was a good thing. She would definitely not go near him again if she had. She would have been terrified. But he seemed his usual self now.

Rowena’s heart was singing. The Protector was here, in her daughter’s house and he was extremely powerful. She looked at her husband, carefully eating his dinner.

*George, George, it really is him!*

*Not now, woman, I am enjoying my steak. I don’t want to think.*

*Suit yourself, but that’s all you will get tonight with that attitude.*

*Oh God, okay, what do you want? Of course it's him.*

*Does he know who he is?*

*Not yet, but he can feel it. It is a bit too strong for him.*

*Too strong?*

*Yes, he can't control it yet. He needs time.*

*For what? He must do his job. What bloody time?*

*Woman, let it be. It will come right. Please, let it be so I can eat my steak. It is delicious, my love.*

*Okay, okay! But is Rebecca alright?*

*Look at her dear. She is in love with her Protector. What more do you want? Get out of my head, please. The food is really good!*

She was relieved, but also confused. Why did Rebecca not see it? He was clearly the white tiger. Those blue, blue eyes were so unusual in their hue. How could she have missed the connection? He even walked like a tiger. He took long, slow, deliberate strides. Just one look at him and you would see the white tiger in him. *Rebecca, why do you deny him?* But Rebecca was laughing at something he had said to her. *Does he know? Is he even aware of what had happened?*

Clayton had been very aware of what had happened. It had started yesterday, when he spoke to her father. George's voice had hit him in the gut. It was a peculiar, familiar tug. He had felt the need to protect Rebecca and it had grown stronger as the night had progressed. He had wanted to claw anyone who harmed her. The animal urge to protect her rose inside of him and was at boiling point when he saw George at the door. He had felt the hair rising at the back of his head and if someone had touched Rebecca, even casually, he would have torn his throat out with his bare hands. It was George's eyes that had jolted him out of the mood. They were the same black, sparkling eyes he loved so much. George had sighed and it had calmed him.

Clayton had also realized something. He loved her. He had watched her teasing Jonathan and making her father laugh and he loved her, the way her eyes danced and the way she tried to warm everyone's life. The realisation had calmed and frightened him. He was in love with a woman he had not even touched. Now that was a first for him. He did not know what he would do.

Rebecca smiled as she went to bed. Clayton was so cute and caring. He had charmed her parents and they had liked him. She also felt calm tonight. The Darkness had not come. It was the first time a man was in her house and it had not come. Perhaps it feared her father and mother together. It was so good to sleep without the hissing sound threatening her, reminding her.

On the way home, Jonathan and Jackie were silent for a long while.

“So, that was very pleasant, dear.”

Jonathan laughed. She was playing with him. She wanted him to admit he was wrong and she was right. *We shall see about that.*

“Yes, Rebecca’s parents are delightful. She is very lucky to have them. And Clayton, he behaved.”

“What? You bastard. Don’t even try that one on me.”

“What, honey?”

“Oh, you are hopeless. Next you are going to tell me you did not see your friend behaving like a lion. Don’t you dare!”

“But I did not say that. You must admit that despite the animal thing, he behaved pretty well. No accusations, no talking butterflies...”

She glared at him coldly.

“Okay, he did look a bit strange when he first arrived. I don’t know what that was about. Also, I admit fully that I saw the parents ‘talking’ and it was interesting to watch. Other than that, it was pretty normal.”

“Are you not concerned about all this?”

“Of course I am. It is not every day that one of my colleagues and friends becomes a lion and then a man in the space of 60 seconds. I don’t expect that at a dinner party, only in a sci-fi movie. I just don’t know what it means. Something is wrong with him. Brad Adcock phoned me today to ask if Clay is okay. He says Clay asked him questions about Rebecca and got all possessive about it. They met for drinks on Friday and Clay just pretended they never had the conversation. He says Clay was distracted and seemed different.”

“Oh gosh. What did you say?”

“I told him he has been stressed and that he met Rebecca and was interested in her, but she refused. He seemed satisfied with that. I don’t know, honey. Brad is really protective over Rebecca, and this thing with Clay could cause some problems between them.”

“I don’t know what to think. Should we be afraid *for* Clayton or afraid *of* him?”

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## Chapter 9

Rowena and George loved taking care of their daughter. They never openly discussed Clayton, but were very happy when their daughter went out to dinner with him on Wednesday night. Rowena, desperate to move the romance along, had prepared a delicious bath with red rose petals for love for her daughter. They watched anxiously as she dressed and she felt as if she was in high school all over again.

When Clayton arrived, they fussed over him and he laughed when they told him to take good care of their daughter. The father had been dead serious when he said that, hoping it would 'help' the boy along to realize his role.

Clayton took her to a quiet, dark restaurant decorating in soft peaches and pinks. It was very pretty and the food was delicious. It was a pleasant dinner and they chatted about work. Clayton was too scared to talk about important things, because he knew he would blow it. He would talk about the butterfly and that would be it. He had promised Jonathan and Jackie that he would have a normal conversation, no strange things. He had denied his 'lion ways' and told them they were also going crazy. He was so convincingly normal that they had started to doubt what they might have seen. He had been his usual self and there was nothing to support the view that he might be a werewolf or lion.

He so enjoyed talking to Rebecca, but the absence of meaningful conversation was a void between them.

Rebecca was also afraid to say important things to him. What could she say? *I want to be with you, but I know, for a fact, that you will run away into the night, never to return? That there a small little matter of The Darkness that will frighten you, or even harm you?* What could she say? What could she offer him or promise him? So she consoled herself with the thought that at least she could enjoy his smile, his laughter and his beautiful blue eyes. He told her a joke and she threw her head back to laugh. Like lightening, he leaned over her, his hand close to her face. She was stunned and realized that a waiter had almost spilled a glass of wine on her. He had tilted the tray and the glass was slipping off when Clayton caught it. It had happened so quickly that she was motionless. The waiter was also

shocked that Clay had moved so quickly across the table. For a moment, they were all still, suspended in time. Then Clayton moved back, glass in hand.

“Sorry, Princess, but you were about to be baptized in wine. Not that I would have minded. You would look quite lovely bathed in wine,” he said softly.

“Thank you. *I* would have minded.”

“Come, we need to go, before your father sends the police after me.”

When she arose, he did it at last. He lightly placed his hand on her back and a bolt of electricity shock through them. She shivered and he withdrew his hand.

“Oops, sorry!” he said, unable to comprehend her body’s response to him. It was completely unexpected. *God, I want to touch her again, to see if it happens again.*

Rebecca was silent. *Oh God, it was here. It was trying to frighten him away. No, not now. Let him kiss me, hold me and love me first, not now.*

“Oh, it’s okay. Clayton, do you....”

“What?” His voice was sharp.

“Oh, never mind. Let’s go.”

She wanted to ask him to make love to her and hold her, because she did not know whether he would be with her the next day. How could she say that to him? He was already upset about something.

In the car, he put on strange, gothic music which was depressing her. *God, it is happening too soon. He is walking away already.* She was just getting to love his quirky ways, the way he always seemed to have ink on his hand, the way he ate meat like it was the last time he would ever see it, the way he had looked at her with such longing. It was going too soon.

“So, is everything arranged for Double J and their trip to the mountains?”

“Yes, they tell me you don’t want to be there. Why, Rebecca?”

“Because I am a difficult person. My life can be complicated in ways you cannot understand. Because it is too difficult for me.”

“Tell me, please, Rebecca, tell me. I want to help you.”

“Oh Clayton, please, just let it go. I do not want to discuss it. I... things are not what they seem. I am not what I seem.”

“Rebecca, do not treat me like a child. If you do not want my friendship, just say so. But those games are tiring. I have heard it all. What can you say that would so different? Please spare me the drama, okay?”

“Fine, I will spare you the ‘drama’. I have nothing to say about the matter. Is that satisfactory?”

“No, but at least you are being honest.”

He did not speak to her again, but took her inside, where her parents were pretending to be watching television. Since they *never* watched television and had not owned one since Rebecca had left, their ploy was embarrassingly obvious.

“Would you like some coffee?”

“Yes, Clayton will definitely have coffee. Come, my boy, sit here and tell me about your work. Jono tells me you do mostly legislative drafting these days.”

“Yes, I have tried to cut down the litigation, mostly opinions and drafting. I have a good team that does any litigation. The drafting is fun, but takes too much time. Do you still practice?”

“No, not really. My wife freaks out every time I do a case. I try to do the occasional one, if it is interesting. It keeps the muscles moving, you know.”

Rebecca had gone to the kitchen and as she walked in, she had an odd sense. She looked at the two men sitting there and there was something so similar about them. She stared for a while, the tray in her hand, confused by the idea that they looked like father and son. She shook off the notion. Her father had dark hair and dark eyes and Clayton was the exact opposite. *Perhaps all lawyers look alike.*

“Sweetpea, are you okay?”

“Yes, Dad, of course. Now, are you boring my mother with legal speak?”

“No dear. I am watching this programme on TV. Let them talk about it, otherwise your father will want to tell *me* about law. Anyway, it will stop you and Clayton from fighting.”

“Mother! We are not fighting.”

“Yes, you are. You have that stubborn look in your eyes and he looks like you just beat him up. What are you fighting about?”

“Nothing.”

Rowena looked at her husband.

*Come on, help them. She is so scared she is going to collapse!*

*Don't interfere, woman. Let it be.*

*Now!*

*Okay. Nag!*

*Wimp!*

*Let's see if you say that when one of your Darkness friends visits!*

"Stop it, you two. I hate when you do that!"

"No, Rebecca. This is fun. They are having a fight. It is delightful. How do you two do that?"

"How do you know they are fighting?"

"Can't you see? Their eyes are clashing."

"So what are you two fighting about?" Rebecca asked sweetly.

"Okay, Sweetpea. You have made your point. *We*, including your mother, will stop interfering in your business."

"We were fighting because your daughter's too stubborn." Clayton interrupted.

Her father laughed. "And you thought, if you force the issue, she would give in. How funny. You poor man. Did she terrorize you? She hates to be told what to do."

He was laughing hard now, remembering how Rebecca had defied him and always won.

"What is the right strategy with her?" Clayton asked, watching her face, as it turned red. She would definitely not be happy being talked about as if she was not there.

"I have found that you need to charm her. Let her defenses go down, then wham, ask for what you want. It works with her mother and always worked with her."

"Dad, stop this!"

"What is it you want her to do, my boy?"

Her father was enjoying himself. It was a rare opportunity that he got to gang up against Rebecca.

"Jono and Jackie want to have their wedding anniversary party at this place in the mountains. They have invited 10 people to spend the weekend with them and Rebecca does not want to go."

"Leave it to me." He winked at Clayton.

"Dad, you are definitely going too far."

"Sweetpea, we are just teasing you. You looked so tense. Relax. You and Clayton sit here and your mother and I will go to bed. Come honey."

They left the room, but Rebecca knew they would wait up for her.

"I like your parents. They have such an intimate relationship. I have never seen a couple like that before."

"Yes, but they also know how to drive me crazy. Sorry about earlier okay?"

His eyes were a dark blue now and he looked at her.

“Okay, but... no. As your father says, I must charm you. Will it work, Rebecca? Will my charm help?”

He said it so softly, she barely heard him. He picked up her hand and kissed it lightly. There was no electric shock and he was a little disappointed.

“Yes”, she whispered.

Clayton was surprised. He had expected her to shout at him, or say something else. She turned his hand over in hers.

“Clayton, why do you always have ink on your hand?”

“Ink?”

“There”, she put her finger on the spot and the electric shock hit him again. This time it was stronger and he pulled his hand away.

“It is not ink. It is a birth mark. I have always had it. Rebecca, why does your touch shock me?”

“I don’t know, Clayton. I don’t know.” He kept looking at her. Dark blue eyes again.

“Clayton what are you thinking? Your eyes have that look again.”

“What look?”

“They get dark blue, then you ask me something difficult, or you accuse me. What is to come, question or accusation?”

“Question. Do you want to be with me?”

“Oh okay. That is definitely a dark blue question. Yes.”

“So why do you turn away from me?”

“Another dark blue question.”

His eyes were changing now, a light, icy colour.

“Rebecca, don’t tease me now, okay? No teasing, no lies.”

“Because we will hurt each other and I could not bear it. That’s the way it is, isn’t it?”

Clayton saw the pain in her eyes and he turned suddenly and held her. He had wanted so desperately to do that, to comfort her and she collapsed in his arms. He liked the feeling of comfort he gave her.

“Rebecca.....”

“No more dark blue questions, please. It is my turn. Why did you ask me about the butterfly?”

“What?” Icy blue eyes again. *Shit, wrong question, Rebecca.*

“Never mind. It is not important. Leave it. No more questions tonight, okay?”

“What are you avoiding, Princess? What lies behind those sparkling black eyes?”

He moved her away from him, lifted her face and looked into her eyes. Her saw the fear in her and he let it go. *She is afraid of me. I should never have asked about the butterfly. Correction. I should never have accused her about the butterfly.*

She closed her eyes and he said, “okay, relax. No more dark blue questions,” and he smiled. His eyes were their bright blue again. The moment had passed.

“I think I had better go before things get all messy again. Rebecca, I want to talk about this, okay?”

“Okay.”

He got up and she walked him to the door and she heard it, hissing outside. It had moved to the side of the house, away from where her parents were.

“Rebecca, go inside. You should not be outside alone. Good night.”

His voice had been curt. Had he heard it? Had it scared him?

She threw herself on the couch. *Oh God, what can I do? Can I destroy that horrible thing on my own? I have to find a way. I have to have Clayton. He was too wonderful. Yes, there must be a way to kill that miserable fucker!* She got up, agitated and plotted and schemed. *There must be a way*, she convinced herself. She went to bed, filled with fantasies of torture and pain for the creature. None of her plans were even close to realistic, but they made her feel better. *Oh Clayton, don't give up on me yet.*

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## Chapter 10

Clayton was also in despair. As he was leaving her house he had felt that tug again of some urge to protect her. He knew it was not rational. She was safe in her house and her parents were there. Anyway, what could she possibly need protection from except him? *What is wrong with me?* He had held her and it had been so magnificent. He had touched her and he had loved it. He had also enjoyed the ‘shock treatment’. *Imagine what the sex would be like.* He had to get her away to Jonathan and Jackie’s anniversary. He would make love to her there and they would shock each other to high heaven. This thought made him smile and he almost forgot about the fear for her safety, but not for long. He got up in the middle of the night, shocked by his dreams.

Rebecca was bound with thin, silken ropes that he could hardly see. He had just stood there, not seeing them. She was crying out to him, for help, but he could not understand what she was saying. *Use your hands, Clayton, please*, she screamed, but he did not understand. He stood there helpless, unable to protect her. The dream felt so real that he woke up and could not figure out where he was. *That was awful*. He got out of bed and paced in his apartment. He walked round and round, in his slow, deliberate way, his short hair spiky on his head, his blue eyes focused.

If Rebecca could see him now, she would have seen why Nana had called him the white tiger. He was exactly that as he paced. He needed to do something. He knew that Rebecca was tied to his life somehow and he realized he had to do something. The butterfly has something to do with it. He knew she had tried to pretend it was not important, but she had asked him about it. She also wanted to know. The question was why was it important to her? Did it also comfort her? Who had made it for her? Who had the capacity to know how it looked? It was on her back, so the person had to know exactly what they were doing. Rebecca could not have been much help. *What is all this? Why am I behaving like this?* Also, his connection with her father was disturbing. It cut deep in him. Even when the man joked with him, about looking after his daughter, he knew it meant something. He had not been joking. He had laughed with George, but Clayton knew there was more to it. He realized that she was not afraid of him. She always stood her ground with him and flashed her black eyes at him. She was afraid of someone or something else. *Why won't she just tell me? Why won't she give me the thing I need, the honesty? Oh Rebecca*, he lamented, *please, don't lie to me. I can't stand it.*

He went to work in the morning, determined to get some answers from her. Her father had been right. If he simply went there, demanding answers, she would flash her eyes and shut off. He would have to do this the long, patient way. He would have to charm her, and when 'her defenses are down, wham!' her father had said. This was all new to him. He never dealt with people like this. He walked into their lives, got what he wanted and walked right out. Rebecca was not to be treated that way. She would get the better side of him, the gentle, caring man he had forgotten resided somewhere deep inside him.

When Jonathan saw him, he was very perturbed. "What kind of date did *you* have? God, you look awful. Did you misbehave? Any accusations, butterfly, lion?"

"Jono, not now. I feel awful. What are you doing? I need a long talk."

“Hold on. I need to drop off these documents. Come to my office in five minutes. We will go somewhere private.”

He went to Jonathan’s office and Clayton sat slumped on the chair. He was so tired, but also so desperate to get beyond this confusion. He had already started his work on Rebecca. He sent a bright, yellow pot plant to her office this morning. She loved plants and he knew she would appreciate it. It had taken him some 30 minutes to construct a suitable note. Eventually, it had been two simple lines:

*Princess, thanks for a great dinner.*

*Sorry about the dark blues, C.*

Clayton phoned his secretary, and told her he would be out for a while. She seemed to accept this. For once, she did not demand an explanation. Jonathan had gone into an office downstairs and phoned Jackie.

“It is worse than we thought. There is definitely something wrong. He really looks like an animal now. His eyes are wild and he can’t sit still. He wants to talk. What should I do?”

“Nothing, darling, just listen. Please do not argue with him and rationalize things. Just listen, okay? I have to go. See you later. Just listen.”

They went out into the bright sun and Clayton put on his dark glasses. It was too bright and his eyes hurt. They went to the park and Clayton told his story. He told Jonathan everything, the shocks, the arguments, the dream, the father. He left out nothing and Jonathan had such a vivid image of the events that he felt as though he had been there.

“Clayton, is it possible that there is something wrong with you, not her?”

“Why?”

“Because you *did* growl like a lion that night. I swear. Your hair stood up. Your whole body was different. Your eyes were almost white. I know. I was there. You see, she was perfectly okay. That’s why I think it must be you.”

“Yes, I have these funny urges. She seems all right, except she is scared.”

“Of being hurt, Clayton, of being hurt. Let’s face it. You are not the gentlest man when it comes to women, are you? ‘Hit-and-run’?”

“Yes, but she knows I won’t do that to her.”

Jonathan just raised his eyebrows. *Jackie is going to kill me for arguing and rationalizing.*

“Clayton, why is the butterfly so important to you?”

“I don’t know. I don’t know. I just feel it. I feel there is something I need to do. She knows what it is. I can see her withdrawing when I try to ask her.”

“Why not ask her parents?”

“Because she would kill me and then both of them. Because I want her to trust me, to be honest with me. I want it from her, not her parents, or anyone else. I *need* it from her. Jono, I love this woman. No, it is not just sex. I feel her right inside of me and she feels me too.”

“One more thing, Clayton, this shocking business. I don’t think I understand. I am thinking that it only happens when *your hands* are on her body. You hugged her and nothing happened. Is it you? Too much male hormone or something?”

“Yes, that is possible. I never thought about it that far.”

“Also, how did you know the waiter was going to spill the wine?”

“I did not know.”

“If I do a rough estimate, you were about here? She was about here? And the waiter, where?”

“Here, just over her shoulder.”

“Okay, now, if the glass was about to spill, you moved from here? To here? Before it spilled? That is impossible, my friend, unless you knew the glass would fall. In which case, you would have arisen from your seat like this, leaned over and caught it. The other option is that you were sitting right next to her, in which case it might have been possible.”

“No, I was across the table. What do you mean I must have known? That is not logical.”

“No, neither is my best friend becoming a lion or talking to butterflies.”

“Clayton, you said you felt a connection with her father. That is why I ask if you knew about the glass. You see, just before you arrived, the old man walked to the door and *waited* for you to ring the bell. He already knew you were on your way. It was a small thing, but I noticed it.”

“What does this mean?”

“I don’t know. What else does he do that is...,ur... different?”

“He talks to his wife in his head. They had a huge fight, right before my eyes. Not a word passed between them.”

“How did you know they were fighting?”

“I don’t know, maybe their facial expressions or something. I did not think about it.”

“No, I also noticed that. But I could never tell whether they were fighting. I could tell they were talking, quickly, because their eyes were slightly wider when they ‘spoke’. There were no facial expressions, I am sure.”

“Clayton, don’t laugh. But do you know what Rebecca is thinking?”

He laughed. “We would not be having this conversation if I did. I would give anything to get into her head. But, you know, I can sometimes tell what she is *feeling*, like when there is pain or fear. She has never told me that, but I have known. Also, the first time we met, something was happening to her. She stared right into my eyes, looking for something.”

“Yes, and to you too. I remember I told Jackie how odd it was.”

There was a long silence.

“I think I am also going crazy. I think you are to Rebecca what her father is to her mother.”

“What are you talking about, what?”

“I don’t know, but there is a pattern. Also, I still don’t understand why you became a lion in his presence. I can’t fit that piece of the puzzle.”

“I was not a lion. I was just frustrated. He was the first person I saw.”

“No. He was almost speaking to you, and then you calmed down. I was there, remember?”

“Jono, am I going crazy, my friend?”

“I don’t know. But if you are, then so are Jackie and I. If I had not been at the house that day, I would have had you committed by now. No Clayton. There is something that does not fit. You and that family, there is a link. How do we begin to find out?”

“Rebecca. It has to be Rebecca. No-one else.”

“The gods certainly have a twisted sense of humour. Think about it. The moment you start dating a psychologist, you start going crazy.”

“Yes, it is twisted. But I am not laughing.”

“I think for our entertainment, Jackie and I want to invite you two for dinner. We just don’t know what will happen.”

Jonathan was laughing now, trying to ease his friend’s burden.

“Yes, I might become a lion again.”

He raised his hands and roared.

“But seriously, you two must come over, so we can check it out. That way we will all be committed to a padded room with a psychologist.”

They went back to the office and Clayton was looking and feeling much better. He looked over to the harbor and enjoyed the quiet motion of ships moving slowly. Rebecca had left a message on his cell phone, thanking him for the plant. He smiled, hearing her voice, so cheerful and pleased.

Jonathan, however, was not smiling. *Does my friend have special powers?* He wondered about the wine glass. *He had to have known. But how?*

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## Chapter 11

Rebecca had been so pleased with the plant that she kept it right on her desk. She went home for lunch to meet with her parents. She wanted to discuss her new idea with them.

“Mum, Dad, I need your help. I want to fight The Darkness, my way. I want to take it on, alone.”

“Rebecca, it is not done like that. It is the power of the love of a man and a special skill he has that destroys it. You cannot do it alone. Others have tried and it just comes back. It will go away temporarily and then return. My grandmother was just like you, stubborn, wanting things her way. She removed it for a year and then it came back after Nana was born. It ruined the two of them, because they had a child and were so vulnerable. That is why Nana was so strong. It had been in her family when she was baby. Don’t you understand? It will wait until you cannot leave the man.”

“Mum, I have to try. There has to be a way. You always said all spells can be broken. Why not this one?”

They were silent for a while. Should they tell her about Clayton? That she was close to success?

*No. Don’t take the risk with my Sweetpea. Leave it alone, Rowena.*

*But she has the butterfly blues so bad now. She has been upset before, but never like this. She might do something really stupid. She is upset, George.*

*Comfort her. Hold her and give her strength. He is here now. Things have to improve.*

Rowena went to her daughter and hugged her.

“Okay, look, let me make some calls. With the Internet these days, maybe someone has found the unbinding spell for it. Then we can see what to do. Rebecca, it is very dangerous to go it alone, you know.”

“I know, Mum, but I need to do it now. I am ready. Please, help me.”

“Yes, we will. Some of my sisters in the coven specialize in unbinding. I will start today.”

*That’s better.*

*Shut up, you old fool, before I bind your tongue.*

*Try me, you wicked witch.*

“Okay, before you have that conversation, I need to go back to work. Tonight we are going to my favourite restaurant at the Craft Centre. You will like it there, okay?”

When she had gone, George hugged his wife.

“Yes that was clever, my dear. That buys us some time. I asked Nana to speed things up with the boy. But he is as stubborn as Rebecca. They seem to be taking their own time.”

They went into the garden and chatted to the butterflies, whispering to them their wish that Clayton should realize who he was. Rowena went to the phone and began her calls. It was not very successful. Some of them had never heard of the spell or said it was unbreakable. *No matter, I will try again tomorrow.* They were leaving on Wednesday, so she could talk properly to her friends when she got home.

Dinner at the Craft Centre was great. They met a strange assortment of Rebecca’s friends and they liked to see her so relaxed and happy. When Brad came over and gave her a huge hug, George cringed in fear. He was tall, good looking and clearly had strong feelings for his daughter.

Rowena just smiled. *Calm down dear, he is just a friend. He likes her, that’s all.*

*I hope so, because I am sure he is that super rich kid, you know, the one who owns the huge construction company.*

*Yes, but I know he has his own love problems coming, and they have nothing to do with Rebecca.*

When they got home, Clayton had left three messages for her, so they went to bed.

When she called, he had been working.

“Hi, working hard?”

“Hmm. Something I need to do by tomorrow.”

“Thank you for the plant. It was a lovely gesture.”

“It was my pleasure. How was your day?”

He wanted to ask her where she had been, but knew better.

“It was okay, not too bad. I went out to dinner with my parents tonight at the Craft Centre. It was very nice. I ate too much, though.”

“Hmm, I went to eat at Jackie’s fridge. I was too lazy to cook.”

“Ouch, that sounds terrible. How was your day at work?”

“Tolerable. I didn’t get much done though. I could not seem to concentrate. I wish you could shock me now.”

His voice was seductive.

She laughed.

“Be careful what you ask for, you might just get it.”

“I ask, I ask. How about lunch tomorrow? Only one hour though because I have to work.”

“Okay, 12.30? Where?”

“I will pick you up. We can do something different.”

“Sounds interesting.”

“I hope so. I promise to behave, okay?”

“Okay, but do *I* have to behave?”

“Very brave, aren’t we?”

“Yes, remember my parents are here, especially my father.”

“Yes, I guess that should make you feel brave. Rebecca, I was watching them. They have a special bond between them. How do they do it?”

“I think because they trust each other so much. They have shared everything. They are partners in life. She was crossing the street and their eyes met and they knew.”

“Knew what?”

“That they were tied together, that they would be together. He followed her home, just like that. I would have called him a pervert and called the police!”

“Yes, I’m pretty sure about that. You don’t trust easily, do you?”

“No, I don’t. I have no reason to. I feel a dark blue coming up.”

He laughed. “Yes, it was. But, okay, not now. Tell me about you, Rebecca.”

“Well, I am this sexy, young thing who shocks men. How’s that?”

He did not laugh

“That was a joke, you know.”

“I know. It’s not funny.”

“Okay, no sense of humour. This is not good.”

“If you keep teasing me, I will definitely not behave tomorrow. Go to bed, Princess, before I come over there, father or not.”

“Alright, will see you tomorrow. Please do not forget your sense of humour. Pack it neatly in your briefcase. You are being too serious. Goodnight, Clayton, sweet dreams.”

~ ~ ~ ~

But Clayton did not have sweet dreams. Nana was determined to give the boy the message and she appeared that night, a sharper image this time, Rebecca’s screaming louder. She did, however, wait until it was 5 o’ clock in the morning. After all, the boy needed all his strength.

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Clayton took Rebecca out for a lunchtime picnic. Lorraine had been completely horrified when asked to organize the basket. *Who on earth was getting a picnic out of him?* He never bothered with women in any serious fashion. *Who was she, anyway?* But neither Clayton nor Jonathan gave anything away.

It was delightful to sit on the grass and eat their prim sandwiches. Clayton had been prepared. He was not wearing a suit, but casual pants. He looked even better and Rebecca wished he was her lunch. He touched her once on her back and of, course, he was shocked. He was beginning to like it.

She laughed and said, “I warned you”, as if it was the most natural occurrence.

She did not know what it meant, neither did he. But Clayton knew he liked the feel of it. He put his hand on her leg while talking to her and nothing happened. *Okay, it’s her back*, he thought. But it was not so. When he put his left hand casually on her arm, she jumped away from the shock.

“Shit, that hurt.”

“Sorry, I don’t know about this. I think we need to sit down and explore each other’s bodies to find out how this works. I can’t figure it out.”

She thought he was joking and laughed.

“That is the most original line I have ever heard. Come, honey, let me find out where I shock you.”

But his eyes were dark blue.

“Rebecca, has this ever happened with another man?”

“No, never. It is a bit disturbing for me.”

“And you?”

“Never. That is every man’s fantasy, I might tell you. I am afraid I am going to have to keep you forever.”

He was smiling, but she was not. *If only*, she thought.

Clayton had seen the shadow pass over her face. *Okay, she has a problem with long term plans.*

“Clayton, can you come over for a bit tonight? My parents are leaving in the morning and my father seems to have taken a liking to you. Come for a drink and my mother would have cooked for an army. Can you?”

“Yes, of course. I would like to see him again.”

Clayton was very pleased at the opportunity to meet the man again. He could observe things a lot better now that he had spoken to his criminal lawyer friend. He would pay more attention to detail. Jonathan had told him to look for patterns that seemed familiar. *That I can do.*

When he arrived, the older couple were sitting in the garden, having drinks. They looked so relaxed and happy that he envied their easy, comfortable life. He could be happy with their daughter like that, if only she would let him. Rebecca was so relaxed around them that she did not have that look of fear or anxiety when they were near. He paced in the garden, looking at her plants and herbs, intoxicated by the scents. He was particularly drawn to the smell of jasmine, which filled the air. He sat next to a large hedge where it flowed untamed over a pillar. That was her smell. That is what he remembered the most the first time they had met, how the smell of jasmine had interrupted him, sitting on the terrace trying to get some fresh air.

Clayton noticed that George was always the dominant speaker, telling them stories and teasing Rebecca. The mother was a far more passive person, who observed everything and everyone. When they went inside to eat, George sat next to his wife and held her hand. That was when he noticed their rings. Rowena had a large amethyst ring, which looked like a small piece has been broken off. George had the exact missing piece on the ring on his finger. The pieces clearly fitted together. *How odd.* It had been so carefully done that it was not obvious to a casual observer. He noticed also, that George liked to touch his wife, not on her back, but her hands. *Okay, that is familiar, the need to touch.*

“Relax, my boy. You seem so consumed today. Anything important?”

“No, just an observation. I see your rings. They seem to fit, is that so?”

“Yes, it is a symbol of our love and commitment to each other. Each of us with a piece of it. You will see her stone is much larger and that should tell you who holds the power.”

He was laughing at his wife’s mock surprise.

“I wish I had more power. He is always trying to tell me what to do, or rather what I must *not do*. ‘Rowena, stop interfering, stop being a nag, stop thinking so much’,... and so it goes.”

They started arguing about which one of them had the power, but they were teasing each other. George got up suddenly and went to the door. He opened it and then closed it again.

“Sorry, I could have sworn I heard the bell.”

“No, Dad. Who were you expecting?”

“No-one, dear. It must have been in my head. Your mother drives me crazy.”

About 10 minutes later, the bell did ring. It was Rebecca’s neighbour, looking for her cat. She had stepped in, not expecting other people and stopped dead in her tracks. She was staring at Clayton, clearly impressed. Rebecca introduced her to everyone and she apologized for interrupting them. Clayton did not even notice her interest in him.

He simply said, “it is in the garden, under the far bench.”

He had not thought about it, but assumed he had seen or felt the cat there. She collected her cat and left.

“Thank you Clayton, I can never find her cat. It creeps in somewhere and it takes hours to find it.”

Rebecca was relieved that it had been found quickly, because she did not want her wondering around, looking at Clayton with such keen interest.

*Well, it takes one cat to find another, don’t you think?*

*Shut up, woman.*

After they had eaten, Clayton and the George went into the garden. George wanted to have a cigarette and took Clayton with him.

“Well, Clayton, it has been very interesting to meet you. I am glad that Rebecca has you at her side.”

“Yes, it has been interesting. But you should know that I am not at her side. She pushes me away all the time. It has made me do strange things. Even my dreams are getting strange.”

“Really, how so?”

“I have dreams about her, afraid and me, trying, but unable to help her. I wake up and my body is hot like I have a fever, even if it is cold outside.”

“How awful for you.” *God, Nana was laying it on thick.*

“George, I have watched you with your wife. What is it that binds you two together, so...clearly and tightly?”

“Love, of course. The first time I saw Rowena, I was drawn to her. I knew I would never be happy without her. She knew it too. I was a young man. A hot-shot lawyer and she was a fancy-pants accountant. I knew it as a certainty. You know, it was odd that we had never met before that day, because her office was two buildings away from mine. I had thought I knew all the pretty girls in the area, but one day, her green eyes flashed at me, as if telling me to get out of her way and it hit me. I followed her home. She lived with her mother and I just went straight there and asked her out. She stared at me for a while and then said ‘sure’. No excitement, no fanfare. The interesting stuff happened months later. We fought a lot those days. She would attract men like flies to her and she would simply smile at them. I hated when she did that. She still does it now, just to make me mad.”

He was laughing now.

“Rebecca has that same look. She simply smiles and a father can go crazy trying to protect his daughter from leering men. Her mother would simply tell me to bugger off. When they went shopping together, I would worry so much about my two beautiful women smiling at strange men, especially because they seemed to enjoy the attention.”

“I can imagine. That would drive any man crazy.”

“If you love her, Clayton, then listen to your heart, not your head. It is the only way.”

He got up and led the way back inside. He had nothing more to say and Clayton knew that was all he was going to get. *The only way for what? Why?* He wanted to ask, but he knew George had finished.

Inside, Rebecca and her mother were sitting on the couch giggling.

“What’s so funny?”

“Nothing. Girl talk,” the mother said.

“Come, husband. I want an early start tomorrow.”

When they were alone, Clayton said, “girl talk?”

“Yes, she was telling me secrets on how to get a man to behave. Think I need those tips Clayton?” she said softly.

“Hmmm, I wonder what you have to do. It might be interesting to find out.”

She walked up to him. “Well, she says I must stand really, really close to you, like this and look into your eyes, touch you lightly like this.... and watch your eyes.... then...”

He bent down and kissed her. *Ah, this is beautiful.* He kissed her over and over again and wanted to claw her clothes off her. *Yes, that’s what I need to do.* He grabbed her blouse.

“No, Clayton, you are supposed to behave now.”

“No.”

He cupped her breasts and felt their warmth in his hands. There was no shocking this time, but a gentle wave that carried them away. Rebecca clung to him.

“Oh Clayton, if only ...” and stopped.

That broke the spell for him

“What, if only what, Rebecca?” His eyes were dark blue again.

“I don’t know what I was going to say. I don’t know.”

She moved away from him and turned away.

Clayton started pacing now. He wanted to shake her until she answered all his questions, to pin her down on that couch until he was satisfied with her. He wanted her and wanted to know everything. He was battling for control and it did not help that she stood there, silently, not moving. She looked worried again and it eased some of his tension. *Go easy, don’t push her,* he persuaded himself. But he could not let it go.

“Rebecca, show me your butterfly again.”

She turned and stared at him. *Shit, Jonathan and Jackie are going to kill me. I raised the butterfly story again.*

“It is very beautiful. Please I want to see it again.”

She turned her back and lifted her blouse. It sat on the edge of her jeans and he stared, transfixed. *Yes, this is definitely my butterfly.*

He moved his finger and touched it and the shock that hit him almost knocked him off his feet. It had hurt him this time, but seemed not affect her too much. She just tensed and pulled her blouse down.

Clayton’s face was white. For in that moment, he had heard the voice again, *use your hands, Clayton. Please use your hands.* It was the voice of his dreams.

“Are you okay, Rebecca?”

“No, but then I will never be okay. Do you understand? Clayton. I am different. I will never be okay,” and she started to cry. Clayton went to her, holding her tight. For once, his mind was not filled with questions to ask her.

“I need to sleep Clayton. I am so tired. So tired.”

“Okay, Princess.”

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## Chapter 12

When he left, his emotions were raw and his mind in overdrive. *Shit, I am not going to sleep again tonight, and that dream is going to wake me as soon as I do manage to fall asleep.* He also felt so tired. His body could sleep, but his mind would not. He drove straight to Jonathan and Jackie. They were watching television and were happy to see Clayton. His life was better than any television show they had ever watched. They wondered what he had done this time. He described the evening and Jonathan spoke calmly and judiciously.

“Okay, we confirm that you are like George. You are to Rebecca what George is to Rowena. We further confirm that the butterfly exists and that it has some effect on the both of you. Also, Rebecca knows something, but not everything. She is also in the dark about some things. Further, Clayton, I am now convinced that you have psychic powers. Question, why have you never displayed them before? Why now?”

“Because he only needs them for Rebecca. I don’t know. He needs you to do something for her. But I don’t think she knows. She thinks it is hopeless. Does she perhaps have a terminal illness? She is concerned about long term plans. Is she dying, perhaps?”

“No! No! That will never be. She is *not* dying.”

Clayton’s eyes were flashing, their white colour beaming on them. He looked like he would tear them apart. *Great, Jackie has brought the lion back.* They stared at him, but were not afraid.

“Clay, you are being the lion again darling”, she said gently.

“Yes, when he feels he must protect her, he becomes a lion. Protect her from what?”

*Dying?* Jonathan thought but did not say the words. Clayton was getting back to normal and he did not want to see that lion thing again. *It is very disturbing, especially when his hair spikes up.* Jonathan was concerned. He hoped this thing could be contained, because it would not do well for Clayton’s professional career if he started behaving like a lion in court, or in the board room. This thing could ruin his perfectly constructed career. He had thought to tell him to come to court with him tomorrow, because she was testifying. But under cross-examination, when her opposition was hostile to her, Clayton might easily become the lion. *No, I will not tell him. Too risky.*

“How does he protect her?”

“With my hands. I do not understand that. Every night in the dream, she says ‘use your hands’, over and over again.”

Clayton was getting despondent. He was going round in circles, pacing up and down in a mental and emotional cage with no way out. Only Rebecca had the key.

“She is coming away with us, even if I have to drag her there. I want her away from her comforts, her hiding places and I will extract every single thing she knows about this. There is no other way. I can’t go on like this. I can’t control my thoughts, my dreams and even my body. No, she will come with us.”

Nobody disagreed with Clayton. *Perhaps it would best, anyway, Jonathan thought. Maybe we can assess the situation objectively, because he is too involved. Of course, Clayton can simply walk away from this complex relationship and go back to his old ways. No, he could not, even if he wanted to.* The woman had changed his life. What he could not work out was whether it was for the better or worse.

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When he saw Rebecca the next day, he still could not answer this question. She looked tired and defeated, even worse than Clayton. He chatted to her about Jackie’s work. Eventually, against his better judgment, he asked.

“So how are things with Clayton?”

“Oh Jono, it is the best and the worst. It is filled with strange and erotic things. I don’t know, but either we are both crazy, or the world around us is not real.”

“Really, why?”

“We seem to get along fine and then things change quickly, for the worst. I don’t know how to deal with him. He can be very erratic, so charming and sweet and then all huffy and puffy. It is very hectic, but I can’t seem to turn away from him. I have thought I should just run away from him, let it be, you know? Write it off as a toxic relationship, but I can’t.”

“Is it a toxic relationship?”

“No. Okay, I get your point.”

“Rebecca, what would make it better?”

“There is nothing that we can do. That is the way it is, I’m afraid. You know, there are some things you can change, others you can’t.”

“What would you change, if you could?”

“I would like to stop loving him, needing him, because it will hurt too much when he walks away.”

Jonathan was very surprised by this. She was not dying, she was sure *he* would walk away. Clayton’s reputation had certainly not helped this strange relationship. He could not help but understand her fear. He could not guarantee that Clayton would be there, when his fascination with her and her butterfly passed. He could not say categorically that, Clayton, once he had satisfied his lust, would not walk away. He had seen it too many times to believe that Clayton could suddenly change. She was right to be afraid of being hurt, because there was no reason to believe that Clayton would not hurt her. And given how strange things had been the pain would be unbearable for her. Jonathan had only been concerned about Clayton and felt guilty that he never tried to see things from her perspective. He had always known she was the sensible one of the two. She was right about everything.

“What can be done, Rebecca?”

“I suppose I should sleep with him and get it over with. I will always hunger for him if I don’t.”

*Gosh, she is tough.* She sat there, calmly telling him how she would minimize the damage to her heart. Clayton was way out of his depth with this woman.

“So if you don’t mind, I will join you this weekend. Is it still alright?”

“Oh yes, it is. Clayton will be thrilled. But Rebecca, have you considered the possibility that you might love him more after that, that you cannot assess and minimize the pain, as if you were balancing a check book? Have you considered that *you* might break his heart?”

“Yes, but there is no other way. This way, we shall find out, won’t we?”

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## Chapter 13

Rebecca was excited and afraid as they drove up to the Dragon Mountains. They were staying at a new place which had received a rave review in the press. It was named San Sanctuary, in honour of the San people who had inhabited the area. Jonathan had told her that the cottages were decorated to resemble the caves that the San people had lived in.

She had been apprehensive about sleeping in a cave, but he assured her that it had all the modern amenities she was accustomed to.

Rebecca had refused to travel with Clayton because she wanted time to relax and not to deal with his dark blue questions. It would have spoilt everything and she wanted one perfect weekend with the man she desired. *Nothing more, nothing less.* She sat at the back, while Blake and Chad argued furiously. Blake was accusing Chad, once more, of looking interested in a pretty young boy named Jason. Rebecca smiled. These men, now in their early 40s and lovers for many years, always threw jealous tantrums. While they worked well together as designers of fabric and furniture, they had a torrid, difficult relationship. Blake was impossible when he was jealous and this was often enough. Chad, a few months younger, enjoyed the thrill of knowing that his lover was jealous and therefore still wanted him and flirted outrageously with any younger man. It has always been this way and they loved the fights. Rebecca had always liked them and they had always been dear to her. She hoped they would not fight the whole weekend though, because another gay couple, a lot younger, in their late twenties, was joining them later. Zane was a tall, ridiculously good looking man and his partner, John, was not that bad either. Zane had worked with Jonathan and they had remained friends even after Jonathan had left. Jonathan was like a father figure to them and he often listened patiently to their problems and dilemmas. Zane lived in the unrealistic hope that his parents would someday accept his gay lover and was severely traumatized each time they said or did anything which indicated that they were waiting for him to 'get over it' and marry a respectable woman.

Rebecca was excited at the thought that she would finally seduce Clayton. She had decided to defy The Darkness and she wanted just one opportunity with him. She accepted that this was all she would get and remembered her father telling her to take whatever pleasures she could have with him. She was also so afraid of what might go wrong. Her father had told her it was much stronger now and that this time was different. *What will happen?* She had learnt, through her mother, how to circumvent its power for short periods only. She had learnt to go indoors and to light candles. Also, the jasmine bath seemed to work. She was going to do it all and hoped it would stay away long enough for her to truly enjoy Clayton. She was also afraid about Clayton. Things were also different with him. There was no way she could explain why his touch had shocked her, as if fighting her flesh. She had tried to pretend it was funny, but she had realized that it might be a sign of the sheer power of The Darkness. He might turn away from her anyway. But

she knew that this was a chance she was willing to take. At least she would have tried her best. *In any event, how dare The Darkness come into my life and try to ruin it? I want Clayton and no Darkness is going to stop me.* She was certainly prepared to go down fighting. This weekend, at least, Clayton was going to be hers. She had planned everything carefully, had shopped for seductive clothes, underwear and sleepwear. *Gosh, Clayton is certainly turning out to be an expensive lover for me.* She hoped it would be worth it.

Her thoughts were disturbed by Blake apologizing for the fighting.

“It’s okay, really. It is not like I haven’t been with you two before. Anyhow, it was good of you to give me lift.”

“Anything for you, my dear. Now tell us about that hunk of yours. He is so gorgeous. He has the most beautiful eyes. They are like specks of azurite against a perfect body. My, you are so lucky.”

Rebecca was laughing. She knew he was trying to make Chad jealous, but Chad knew that Clayton was not really a prospect, so he let it go.

“Azurite eyes? Well, that’s a new one. I will definitely tell him that. He was busy with some family claim today, so he is only coming up later. I was not too keen to be driving around in the mountains in the dark. He will bring Zane up with him. Let the men travel in the dark. Also, I wanted to come early, to escape work.”

“My dear, I would have been very happy to get lost in the mountains with your Mr Azurite. It would not have bothered me a bit.”

Chad was not taking the bait.

“Yes, I am sure. But darling, remember that he is taken by our own black-eyed beauty here. You two make an interesting couple. I just got an idea for a lovely tapestry of blues and blacks for couch fabric I need to do. Yes, I can see it, azurite eyes, jet eyes, everywhere, watching, waiting against a background of.....”

“A light, baby blue”, his partner added.

They discussed their newly invented fabric and all was forgiven, for now at least.

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Jonathan and Jackie had already arrived at the Sanctuary. Jackie was animated and happy and fell in love with the place. They stood on the balcony of their cottage, in awe of the views over the mountains.

“This is a brilliant place, J. Look at the views, wow. I feel safe and happy, surrounded by green lush mountains. Look J, every way you turn there is a magnificent view. This is heaven. Thank you for the best anniversary gift. Look at these clever cottages. It makes me horny just thinking about it. Imagine that we will spend a weekend in a cave, without the horrid inconvenience. Oh Jono, I love you. This is perfect.”

Jonathan hugged his wife and smiled at her.

“I love you too, J. This is a magnificent place. I love the way the clouds lightly caress the tip of that mountain. A touch so light, it is barely there. The white of it, so translucent, so elusive, so beautiful, just like you.”

He was caressing her arm and she was aroused by her husband’s uncharacteristic romantic moment. It was not usually his style, but occasionally he surprised her with it and it always made her desperate for his love making.

“Come, let’s go inside. Let me caress you lightly, so lightly that.....”

She never got to finish her sentence. Jonathan was in a loving mood today and nothing was going to slow down his desire to savor the honeyed love of his wife of ten years.

Much later, they lay in bed, talking.

“Jono, we are very lucky to have each other. I love the way you just accept me, all of me, no complications.”

“Yes, my darling, we are very lucky, but sometimes I wish I could give you the one thing you always wanted. I wish I could make that right for you.”

“You can’t, my love. We must accept that we cannot have a baby and try to give each other everything we can. I used to feel so bad about it, but seeing Clayton’s tortured soul all these years, I realized that I have everything I want here.”

She poked his chest. “Here is all I have ever needed.”

“Hmm, even when I am being logical and argumentative?”

“Yes, even then. I would not like it any other way.”

“Talking about Clayton, he said I should not tell you, but he, or rather Lorraine arranged and found this place. He refused to let me pay, J. He said it was the least he could do, considering all the trouble he has been lately.”

“What?”

“Yes, it is his gift to us. We argued for a long time about it, but he really needed to do it. He said he had been so self-centered lately, that he was being a real burden on us. He would not listen to anything I had to say.”

“Oh, Jono, he has always been such a good friend to us. That’s why all this stuff with Rebecca is so hard to accept. He deserves to be happy, to be loved. He has never had that. Even his parents were shits. I love him for wanting to do this for us. I will thank him. Jono, how can we help them? What can we do?”

“I don’t know. I guess this weekend is going to be the ultimate test. I think we must just be there for both of them.”

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Clayton and Zane left late that afternoon and Clayton, anxious to see Rebecca, was speeding like a maniac. Zane chatted away about obscure legal matters, hoping to distract himself from this ferocious man. He knew that Clayton was a nice guy and harmless, but he seemed to have a wasp in his bonnet. He was a little anxious and barely responded when he was spoken to. *He had better relax or we will be killed. John would never forgive me for getting myself killed. John would convince himself that I had done it out of spite, to punish my parents for their refusal to accept him as my lover.* He could see the scene. John, the melodramatic attention-seeker, would be standing at his grave, pointing at his father.

*You, you! You killed the most important person in this world. You, with your pretensions and pseudo-Marxist principles, you killed him. You drove him over the edge of life, no support, no love. Where were you, when he wallowed in the abyss of his despair, rejection and pain? Don’t you dare cry now! What do you cry for? You never loved him! You never cared about the most wonderful man in the world. Dry your false tears! Dry your tears!*

Zane shuddered at the thought. *I cannot afford to die now. I would have an awful funeral. No dignity, no grace. It would be a terrible thing to do.*

“Clayton, please slow down a bit. Are you okay?”

“Yeah, sorry Zane. I am just a little edgy.”

*Yeah, I am sure he is. Rumor has it that some woman had finally put her claws in him, that he was having picnics in the park with her and that he was completely besotted. Well, he deserves it. He has been a real pig to women all his life. He deserves a little rough ride. I heard that he was so distraught over her that he was seeing a shrink. Well, you go girl! Teach the bugga a lesson. Let him know how it feels to be treated badly. Anyway, while I am here, I might as well hear it straight from the stud’s mouth.*

“Yes, I am sure you’re anxious to see her. I believe she is a model?”

“A model?” Clayton laughed.

“Not a chance. She is a child psychologist. I am surprised you haven’t met her. Rebecca Raymond.”

“What? You are dating Rebecca Raymond? No way. She is the most beautiful woman I have ever seen. No way.”

“She is beautiful and also very complicated. She drives me insane sometimes.”

“Rebecca and you. That is the weirdest thing I have ever heard. You are so different.”

“How so?”

“Let’s face it. You are a bit of a ladies’ man. Rumor has it that you don’t exactly care about them, that you leave once you have...ur....had enough. Rebecca, well, she is a class act. She does not mess around. I think every attorney in criminal court looks forward for days she will be around, so they can drool. She is also very sensible. They have all tried to date her. I think she only went out with Kevin Ryan Junior, but that didn’t last long.”

“The young man with a flashy car?”

He could feel the hair on the back on his neck rising, but he calmed himself. *Let it go, it is not important.*

“Yes. I think that was part of the problem. I heard that she hated the way he tried to show her off, as if she was one of his cars. She dumped him and he once tried to cause a scene in court. She was very calm and rational and he felt really silly, especially when she called him ‘spaz’. That tall hunk, Adcock, apparently gave him a good talking to. I thought they were an item, but now, you are in the picture.”

“Spaz?”

“Yes, you know, what you call your annoying little brother or sister. I think some people still call him that.”

Clayton was laughing. He could just see her, haughty and cool, degrading the man. The image pleased him immensely.

“Brad Adcock is a good friend of mine. We hang out together, and he would step in that situation. I am so sorry he couldn’t join us this weekend. He knows how to have fun, but he had a car accident. But I think his ego is more bruised than his body. He met some woman who is driving him crazy.”

Clay smiled at the image of Brad fuming incoherently that his red girl had hang up on him and just left him in the hospital. Brad had gone all mushy in the head. He knew the feeling. He thought about Rebecca. How he never understood her too. He had psyched himself up for a huge fight with her, when he would have to force her to come this

weekend. But, to his surprise, *she* had called him and told him, ‘if it was still okay,’ she would like to come. She had so sweet and demure that he had been a bit suspicious. *Will she just vanish at the last minute? Will she go to her parents or find some excuse to get out of it?* He had anticipated this and had been happy to arrange his affairs so that he could leave later, when he was sure she was on her way. All this planning, however, had been in vain. Jackie had phoned him just now to tell him that she had arrived and was enjoying a sundowner with Blake. *Well, I will never know this woman. What made her change her mind?* Jonathan had said he thought she was tired of fighting and really wanted to see if it worked. *How could it, when she does not tell me the truth? She is probably banking on charming me so that I can forget.* But, he could not forget, how could he? The moment he touched her he would remember her butterfly and all the other things that bothered him. She could only get away with it if she never touched him. *She is in for a rude surprise if that is her plan.* They had two cottages with an inter-leading door. He had seen to that. He was determined that she would not escape him. He wanted her, all of her, but she had to be honest with him. This weekend, he was determined to know the truth about her and why she had his butterfly.

Clayton did not know just how much truth he would find out and the cost of that truth.

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## Chapter 14

Everyone had arrived, except Clayton and Zane. The other couple, Melissa and Arnold Jackson, had settled in nicely. They were a quiet pair, who spent most of their time alone. Melissa was an interior decorator and her husband was an accountant. He was a sullen man who spoke very little, while Melissa seemed to enjoy socializing more. They chatted briefly to everyone and then went to their cottage. They only emerged again in time for dinner.

It was already 8 o’ clock and they all went to dinner. *Where is Clayton? He should have been here an hour ago. He is surely taking his time.* Jackie was a little apprehensive. She knew that she had phoned a long time ago to tell him that Rebecca had arrived, so he should have been here already. Jonathan was worried. *What if he has a ‘lion episode’ on the way? He might be killed and poor Zane, having to find out that the man is also a lion.*

Rebecca was starting to fret. *What if The Darkness had got him? What if he changed his mind?* She went outside and called him on his cell phone.

“Hello?”

*Gosh, it is not his voice.*

“Hello, can I speak to Clayton?”

“Rebecca? It’s Zane. Hi and hold on.”

“Princess.”

“Clayton, where *are you?*”

“What’s wrong Princess, can’t wait for me, can you?”

“Clayton, this is serious. Are you okay?”

“Princess, relax and please stop tugging at your dress like that. It is so suggestive.”

She turned round and there he was. Her heart missed a beat and she rushed to him.

“I was worried about you.”

“Thought I would be eaten by monsters?”

“That’s not funny.”

“Okay, relax. Zane had some present we had to wait for. Some art that Double J had envied and he had to collect it. Unfortunately we had to wait, because the guy went out to lunch. Sounds like one of your friends.”

Rebecca was not listening to him. She had gone and hugged him. *Okay, so far so good. No electric shocks.* Also, she was happy to see him. At the back of her mind lived the fear that The Darkness would get him before she did.

Zane was standing there, listening with absolute glee. *Wow, the magic between them. Wow! Stud-muffin Clayton Giles, the untouchable is in the arms of a woman and he called her princess.* He savoured the moment and imagined how he would captivate his audiences at dinner parties with this story. *Especially since Ice Maiden had flung herself into his arms like that. Wow!*

“Listen you two, I am going inside. John is probably demanding that the police go and look at the bottom of the river for my body. See you inside.”

“Hi Zane. Will see you later.”

Clayton was beaming.

“So, you phoned to check if I was alright? That is very adorable of you. I like it. Perhaps I should be late more often?”

“Don’t you dare. Clayton it was getting dark and we were all worried. I think you had better go inside so that everyone can see that you are in one piece.”

He kissed her and then led her inside the restaurant. Jonathan and Jackie were very happy to see him and Jackie gave him one of her special hugs. She was whispering something to him and he was teasing her. Zane thought it was so typical of Clayton to have one woman inside the restaurant and another outside. He clearly had not changed that much.

Blake and Chad were simply staring at him, bemoaning the unfairness of the world, that he was not gay. *Why are all the good ones straight? It was a sheer act of discrimination by the gods.*

The dinner was great fun, with John entertaining them with bizarre and obviously untrue gossip. They all chatted to each other and Rebecca was pleased to be there. She had been so pre-occupied lately that she had avoided social functions and now she realized how isolated she had become. She looked up and saw that Clayton was watching her. His eyes were dark blue and she dreaded what he might say, or ask her.

“No, Clayton, not here, not now.”

Everyone stared at them and laughed.

Blake said, “oh down boy, not now,” and giggled.

Clayton joined in the laughter but was quick to point out, “but when, Princess?”

He touched his heart in mock pain and the men nodded and laughed, identifying with his torture.

“That is not what I meant, you beasts.”

Zane was really happy he had come on this weekend. *This is such a bonus.* He would never have believed all this if someone else had told him. *It is too juicy. Stud-muffin is badly, badly burnt. He is in love with the Ice Maiden.* He saw how Clay looked at her, how his eyes would light up and then darken. The man was in serious trouble and Zane loved it. She was not exactly averse to him either. She kept stealing glances at him and he was sure they were having a little chit-chat of their own. It was in their eyes, the way he looked at her and she would look back, as if responding. Although Clayton had joked about it, he was quite sure that there was something serious about to happen before Ice Maiden stopped him. *She is such a spoil sport.* Clayton’s eyes had been dark and intense, not in a sexual way, but in another way, more serious, more important. *Damn. It would have been interesting to hear what he wanted to say.*

Clayton had been watching her and thinking, *will you tell me your secrets tonight?*

She had been thinking, *he wants to know everything tonight. Do I have to tell him? Do I have to?*

*Well, do you want to discuss it now, my dear?*

And that's when she had spoken. They had not realized what had happened and in the joking and teasing that ensued, both of them forgot the moment.

After dinner, while some were getting drunk and raucous, Clayton and Rebecca slipped away to their cottages. Rebecca was keen to get him into her bed and he was keen to hold her, get shocked and then be told everything. Those were their expectations.

They walked in silence, in the dark, Rebecca hesitant, thinking about The Darkness, and Clayton, sure-footed, thinking how good it would be. At the cottage, Clayton went to take off his suit. Rebecca, in the adjoining cottage, decided to change too. It was well after midnight, but they behaved like the night was just beginning. Rebecca was trying to decide whether to wear the long negligee or a pair of cheeky shorts to seduce him, when she heard it. It hissed and sucked the air in great big gulps. It was angry, agitated. It came to the patio door, tapped on the glass and moved away. It wanted her to know it was there. Rebecca cried out.

"Not now. No, not now."

She fell onto her knees. She could never win. She would never have the man she loved. Tears were streaming down her face when she realized she was not alone and when she looked up, the shock ravaged her body. She stared at him, motionless, unable to comprehend. There was Clayton, with nothing on but a white towel, his hair standing spiky and his eyes white and crazed. He looked like he would pounce on her.

Clayton had gone into the shower, needing to calm his nerves. He had just run the water when he heard it, the hissing, threatening sound. His hair had stood up and he knew it was going for Rebecca. He rushed to the adjoining door, but they had not unlocked it. He saw no key, so he went outside and that's when he saw it. It was a great, brown bat, tapping its beak on the window. It wanted Rebecca and he moved towards it. It looked at him and he saw its fear. Something about him had scared it, because it flew wildly away. *Is Rebecca alright?* He panicked and ran to her. He saw her, sitting there, crying. He could not move. Her fear and desperation shocked him. He was even more shocked at the way she stared at him, as if he was an animal.

"Clayton, Clayton, you are the white tiger? Oh, Clayton. Why didn't you tell me? Why did you keep it from me? Why Clayton? Why?"

She was hysterical now, and Clayton just stood there. *What was going on, white tiger, me? What is she on about?*

He moved towards her, but she lifted her hand.

“Don’t dare touch me, you bastard. Don’t you dare! You liar! What did you think would happen? Tell me, tell me.”

“Rebecca, please calm down. I don’t know what you are saying. Rebecca? Rebecca?”

“How could I have not seen it? Those eyes, of course. You were staring me in the face the whole time. Those blue eyes. Of course, the harbor. Your office is right there, on Victoria Street.”

“Rebecca, are you listening to me? Calm down. I am coming to you now, okay?”

He moved to her and touched her arm. The electric shock hit them and she shouted.

“Why do you try and hurt me? Why? You are supposed to me my Protector. You are not supposed to hurt me. Go away. You want to hurt me.”

“Rebecca, Princess, please, I don’t want to hurt you. You are just scared, okay? Please, let me hold you.”

Rebecca felt defeated. He had come straight after The Darkness. She was confused. *Has my white tiger gone dark? Is that why things had been different? That he would betray me? Okay, he might as well get it over with. Let it be the end.*

She felt him lift her and put her on the bed. He was holding her and he let her cry. He rocked her gently and she fell asleep. Clayton covered her, but he could not bear to leave her. He had no clue what was going on, but her fear had been shocking, to say the least. *What is that thing? Why has it come for her? Why does she think I am a white tiger? What is she accusing me of?* These questions plagued his mind, until he fell off to sleep, holding Rebecca.

~ ~ ~ ~

Rebecca woke up and felt Clayton’s arm around her. She turned and stared at him. He was sleeping, a frown on his face. He opened his eyes to see Rebecca staring at him. She saw the confusion in his face and his fear that she would attack him again. She looked at his blue eyes, as they got darker and she finally accepted the truth she had been too scared to accept. Clayton was her Protector, her white tiger. He did not know. She felt slightly silly. Nana had given her such a clear description of him. His azurite eyes were

unmistakably those of a white tiger. Also, he walked in that slow deliberate way and often paced when he was agitated. Why had she not accepted this truth?

“Rebecca?” Clayton sounded so unsure of himself, it broke her heart.

“Clayton, hello. I think you should put something on because that white towel is not hiding a thing.”

Clayton did not move. He was looking at her, trying to decide if he had been dreaming. She was behaving as if nothing had happened. Was he hallucinating, as Jono would say?

“Rebecca, what happened last night?”

“Clayton, dark blue questions so early.”

She tried to move away from him, but he held her.

“No, no more running away. Now Rebecca, now.”

“I know, but can we just sit properly, have some coffee and talk? Please. I need it. I really need it. I know that there are things we need to talk about Clayton, but some coffee first? And clothes for you? Okay?”

Clayton could see she was trying to buy some time and he could see she was afraid.

“Alright, let’s do it your way. But Rebecca, we are not leaving this place until you have told me everything. I don’t care if we stay here forever. Do you understand?”

“Yes. Now, can I make us some coffee?”

Clayton got up and found the key and opened the door. He left the inter-leading door opened as he dressed. He did not want anything to happen while he went out, so he listened carefully as she made the coffee.

They sat in the kitchen at the table and Clayton waited patiently for her to begin.

“Clayton, I don’t really know what to say. It is so complicated and strange and I want to tell you that, if at the end of this, you think I am crazy, I will understand. I also want to say that I have tried so hard, in my mind, to keep you out of this. You must believe me. I tried to pretend that I didn’t know, so that I could protect you. Okay, what do you want to know?”

“Rebecca.”

His eyes were icy blue and he was getting annoyed with her. He waited a long time to hear what was going in their lives and all she was doing was trying to stall.

“Rebecca, I want to discuss this rationally. But, you are determined to make me angry. What do I want to know? What the fuck is that supposed to mean? Are you playing with me?”

“Clayton, please calm down.”

She got up and paced around, coffee in hand. What should she say? Where to start? Clayton's eyes followed her as she paced. He did not move from his seat. He was starting to frighten her. He looked like he would explode. *This is not helping.* Where should she start?

"Tell me what that bat-thing was outside last night. Why he came for you."

"Okay, well that's The Darkness. It is a creature which was created or rather born when I was born. It has the sole purpose of destroying me, my life basically. Oh Clayton, how do I say this? Okay, let me tell you what happened. I was fourteen years old when I became aware of the problem."

Her eyes clouded and her mind meandered its way back in time.

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## Chapter 15

Rebecca was fourteen years old when she first realized that something was odd about her. All the boys feared her and very few tried to ask her out on a date. She knew she was beautiful and was confused why other less attractive girls got more boys interested in them. Rebecca felt hurt and isolated and fought back with her intelligent wit and soon was very popular at school. However, boys were always hesitant with her. One boy, Malcolm, a tall thin boy with shy smile, often walked her home and chatted to her. He clearly liked her and they spent a great deal of time together. She desperately wanted him to touch her, but he always hesitated. She asked him once why he did not like her and he simply replied.

"I am afraid of what you will do to me. Oh Rebecca, I want to kiss you so much, but I know you will hurt me."

She had pushed him for more information, but he said nothing. She felt rejected and confused. That night she went to see Nana, who lived close by and asked her why boys were afraid of her.

They sat on the patio and Nana was silent. Rebecca became hysterical. "Oh, no, there is something wrong with me. Nana, please, not you too. My parents stare blankly when I ask and you too."

Nana, her short red hair blowing in wind, had held her close and tried to comfort her.

"No, I do not want your comfort, tell me the truth."

Nana had gone inside and returned with a dusty photo album. The whole album was filled with pictures of men, some young, some old, some recent pictures, some fading.

“These are all the men that I have loved or who have loved me through my life. None of them have lasted long in my life. Each of them, for some reason, would turn away from me in fear. Only your grandfather remained with me. He was my Protector, as your father is your mother’s Protector. That is what the special man is called ‘The Protector’.”

*What is Nana on about? What protector? From what?*

“You see my child, all women born from my family have been cursed. This is an old curse and nobody has been able to break it. It seems that one of your great grandmothers, Portia, was quite the favored one with men. Because she was so beautiful, she always got the men she wanted. One woman, Felicia, finally put an end to it. Portia and Felicia were best friends, until Portia tried to steal her friend’s husband. Felicia went into the forest, where she met with a black witch. They made ‘The Curse of The Darkness’, a spell which binds many generations to its power. It creates a creature, which looks like a bat with yellow, owl eyes. It is born the day a female child in the family is born. It lives and watches and its lone task is to frighten men away from the woman concerned.”

Nana looked tired now.

“But Nana, there is no such creature with me. I know this. Surely I would have seen it or felt it?”

“Rebecca, you must let me finish. The creature, known as The Darkness, is not seen by all. It creates a shadow and glares with its yellow eyes over your shoulder at a man who cares about you. It will frighten him and make him believe that you are frightening. It has always been this way. My mother, frustrated and tired, found a white witch to try and break the spell. She could not break it, but she found a way to deal with it. It seems that the spell was based on lust and sex, not love. It works on a man’s fear. If he really loved a woman he could match the force of The Darkness with love. The only men who have seen the creature are the men who can protect you from it. Each of us has a Protector. He is the only one who holds the key to its weakness. Rebecca, until you meet your Protector, your relationships will be short and painful. You must learn to accept this. Many men will desire you, but few will ever enjoy the pleasures of your flesh. That was the basis of the curse, that all of us would be untouchable, though desired. Do you understand, my baby?”

Rebecca was stunned into silence. She could not believe what her grandmother was telling her. She thought of her parents and realized that they had always seemed to have a special bond beyond the normal love for each other. It was also true that her father was his mother’s protector. He was fiercely protective over her and she often teased him about it. Nana explained that each woman in the family had a protective symbol, which did not

destroy The Darkness, but limited its power. Without the symbol, the Protector could be killed or destroyed. She explained why her mother never took off the large amethyst ring she wore and why she had a red dragon's eye tattooed on her left shoulder. She told Rebecca that The Darkness grew stronger with each generation and it seemed to affect the women at a younger age. She had only experienced its power at the age of twenty-five, but Rowena had felt it at eighteen. Now, she was feeling its effects at fourteen. Nana was worried about this. *What does it mean?* She told Rebecca that they would know that the curse was over when the woman bore a son. No woman had born a son in her family in many generations.

"I will meditate tonight for you. Give me your watch. And I will discover the symbol of your protection. We must get to work right now, before someone is harmed. The Darkness is getting too strong."

Nana watched as Rebecca left and the sadness of the girl's future brought tears to her eyes. *What will happen to the poor child?*

Rebecca went home filled with fear and understanding. She told her parents what Nana had told her and her mother wept.

"Oh Rebecca, you always ask why we never had any other children. That is the reason. We were too afraid and we could not even imagine putting anyone else through the trauma. My baby, we had decided we would not have children, but by some miracle, you were conceived. We never understood it and worried so much about you. What did it mean that you were conceived? The doctors told us that my contraception had failed, but we knew better. We had tried to cheat the curse and could not. Once you were born, we were so grateful for the gift of you that we had denied the trauma that was inevitable in your life. We lied to ourselves that this time could be different. Your father and I just deluded ourselves with false hope and fantasy. Oh, my dear Rebecca, we are so sorry."

She held her daughter and continued to weep, tears of frustration, fear and helplessness. Rebecca was still bewildered by these revelations and asked.

"Mum, what was it like, the years before you met Dad?"

"Oh baby, it is so horrible. You have to be strong, all the time. You need so much patience and it is painful."

Her father, who had been silent, said softly.

"Sweetpea, at least you will be truly loved. The good thing that comes out of this is that one man will love you so much he will be prepared to die for you. The Curse was not based on love and they never thought about love. Sweetpea, you will know true love one

day. Your mother has given me that. A chance to truly love a woman. Your Protector will be privileged to be the one. You must talk to us about it, anytime. Do not be afraid, because you have the power of love.”

“But, Dad, what if I don’t ever meet this Protector? What happens to me?”

Her father was appalled by this question. It had never occurred to him that the Protector might fail. *What would happen to my daughter? Would she just die slowly, the way Portia had done, tortured by her desires and not being able to fulfill them? Both Felicia and Portia had died within a few years of the casting of the curse. Felicia from the sheer hatred or guilt and Portia from longing. They had destroyed each other in their bid to win. What would happen? Would my daughter die from longing?* He shuddered at the thought and knew he would never tell his daughter these fears.

“Darling, Sweetpea, there has never been a time when the Protector did not come. I spent many years searching for something, not knowing what it was. He will not be able to resist his calling to you. He will find you. That is how the Universe works. It is about balance. Just as The Darkness is born, so too is a Protector. You must believe this, for it will give you hope and strength to endure the injustice you will feel over the years. In any case, you might be lucky and he might find you sooner, rather than later.”

He said these words with such conviction that he was starting to believe them himself. But the dark nagging thought loomed at the back of his mind. Nothing had been constant. *She might meet him when she is eighty years old or twenty years old. There is no way of telling.*

The next morning, Nana spoke long and hard to her parents over the phone. They spoke in hushed tones and as much as she tried, she could not to hear the conversation. Her parents took her to Nana that evening, warning her that her symbol would be revealed. When they arrived, there was an old woman, with long white hair sitting on the couch. She had sharp brown eyes and she stared openly at Rebecca.

“Yes, she must keep the symbol on her tail. That is where she will receive the greatest protection.”

Rebecca clung to her mother, suddenly afraid. While she had grown up in a family filled with magic, potions and talking to dead ancestors, she had never heard anyone talk about a tail before. Was she now an animal? Had her family gone mad?

“Theresa, please, you are frightening the child. What do you mean by her tail?”

“Your daughter resembles the green dragon and her tail, at her root chakra, is where her power to fight is strongest. She must also learn to use breath. Yes, she must use words,

like chants and affirmations to conquer her enemies. Yes, she looks like a green dragon. See how her eyes sparkle with emotion.”

The old woman chatted and said many other things to her parents, but she was still reeling from the description of her as a dragon. These words did not comfort Rebecca. She was more horrified at being called a green dragon than anything else.

“The symbol for the girl is a butterfly. It is known for its power as a messenger to the soul and the blessing of happiness and pleasure. She needs a butterfly which will complement the Protector. I see blue and white around him and much pain and passion. The butterfly shall be blue.”

Rebecca’s fourteen-year-old brain could not absorb it all. She ran out of the house and into the garden. She sat on the swing in the corner of the garden, surrounded by yellow daisies and red carnations. Her grandmother was an aggressive gardener, where all her plants and herbs were arranged in the order of balance and harmony with the Universe. *I want to go home. I don’t want to hear about dragons and Protectors and tails. I want to go home. I just want to be like all the other girls at school, worrying about growing breasts and boys. Why can’t I be like all the other girls at school?* She started to cry and saw her father approaching her.

“Dad. Leave me alone. I don’t want to hear about dragons and things. I am just a kid. I want to be like the other kids. Why can’t I just go to the Mall and shop and talk about boys? Why am I talking about a tail? Dad, please, take me home. I want to go to my room.”

He went to her and held his daughter. Tears rolled down his face for his Sweetpea. *She has done nothing to deserve this.* He listened to her angry, frightened tears and could not disagree with her. *Why such a burden for my precious daughter? Why, oh why?* They cried together on the swing and were comforted by their tears.

“Oh my baby, I would die to have it different for you. I would do anything to save you from this pain. I know this is frightening for you. It is so for me too. You are my baby, my precious miracle baby. I would do anything to save you from this curse.”

He wiped his eyes.

“Oh Sweetpea, you must do whatever is necessary to protect yourself from The Darkness. It is vicious and can kill you slowly. We must try to weaken its power. Please, baby, you must be strong for you and me and your mother. We need your strength now, okay?”

His urgent tone soothed her frightened nerves and soon they were talking generally about life and magic and dragons. She asked many questions about them and he told her all he knew. He tried to make her realize the importance of their symbolism as the guardian and protector of the precious, but she, so young, had vivid images of spitting fire and red eyes.

Theresa the crone, as Rebecca called her, was waiting patiently inside the house. She seemed completely unaware of the fear and trauma of the girl, or the intimacy she had shared with her father.

“Rebecca, I have discussed with your mother and Nana what we shall do. We think it best that your butterfly remains part of you, as flesh and blood, so it cannot be taken from you. We will arrange for you to have a tattoo on your tail. ur, sorry, back. This way you will not lose it. I know someone who will do it just right for you. There is very little pain my dear and your Nana will be there. Is that alright with you?”

Rebecca simply nodded. There was no point in arguing about it. The crone had spoken, so it would be.

Despite her fears about it, the tattoo-making process was not too frightening. She had been initially shocked by the shearing pain when she felt her skin was being carefully stripped off her. But her body succumbed to the pain and she was cleverly distracted. The crone’s granddaughter, a young woman with many rings on her face, was pleasant and funny. She treated the tattoo like it was a work of art and Rebecca as her most precious canvass. She played heavy metal music as she worked and it distracted Rebecca from the tingling pain of the needles of the machine. They chatted about many silly things and it took almost three hours on that morning before the young woman announced that her art was done. Rebecca was surprisingly excited. She rushed home and looked at it in the mirror and did so for many days to come. She felt the pain occasionally when she was in bed, but she loved the idea that she was the only one in her school who had a tattoo. The butterfly had calmed her fear and it made her feel special and beautiful. She had a beautiful secret on her back and she loved it.

Her parents were relieved with her response, because they had feared the permanent presence of the butterfly on her body would remind the girl every day of the burden of the curse. They talked about her obsession with butterflies when she was five years old, how she spent hours trying to catch them so that she could whisper to them. Nana had told her that if you whisper your wish to a butterfly, it would come true. The girl spent a great deal of time trying to talk to the butterflies. Her parents, experienced in these matters, should have seen the connection between the girl and butterflies and the comfort and joy they

brought her. However, when she was five, they had convinced themselves that their daughter had escaped the curse. It had been a selfish and ridiculous fantasy, they agreed.

And so it began the war of love and hate, their daughter armed with her new-found power and protection, her war against The Darkness. No amount of rationalizing and magic could allay their fears, that perhaps, this time, love would not be the victor.

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## Chapter 16

Clayton did not look surprised, shocked or even horrified. He sat in the same spot as she paced and spoke.

“The butterfly was my protection. It was made for me Clayton. That is why I was upset when you asked me about it. Clayton, how did you know about my butterfly?”

And he told her, about his wife and what had happened.

“So, it is also your butterfly, it protected you too?”

“Yes, I think so. I understand what you are saying, about the curse. But last night, you kept calling me a white tiger. Jono said I was a lion. Tell me what that means.”

“I asked Nana who was my protector. I was starting to feel that there was no such a thing. In my dreams, she showed me a white tiger, pacing around me, in a large building. She said his power was in his hands. I never understood it. I never understood why she spoke about a tiger, but now I see. Clayton your eyes, that was the thing about you that was so weird. I should have known. Okay, if we are being honest, I think I knew that first time we met. I just couldn’t bear this moment, when I would have to tell you. I couldn’t bear the thought of you being involved, of having to deal with all this. I wanted things with you to be pure, you know? I think I knew the first time, but I desperately needed to deny it. I wanted to believe that you would want *me*, not the job of protecting me, does this make sense?”

“No, it was not your choice to make. You did not decide who I would be and neither did I. Why did you think you could control me or the events?”

“I just wanted the time to.... for you to be with me, Clayton, plain, simple. I wanted this weekend to be that time, two people, having fun together, do you understand?”

“You were going to deceive me? Pretend nothing else mattered?”

“Yes, and I was going to deceive me, so I could have the sheer pleasure of knowing what it was like to be loved by a man, not a tiger, or anything. I was doing a good job of it, too. I wanted to know what it is to be loved, like any other girl.”

Tears were starting in her eyes.

“Was that so wrong, Clayton, to want to be loved, without Protectors, Darkness, or anything else?”

“Oh Rebecca, you are a terrible liar. You thought you could keep it from me and hopefully, it would go away. You would never have told me. You never trusted me, you never felt protected by me. Come here, let me hold you. Don’t cry and don’t lie to yourself or to me. It will not help. It will just piss me off and that will be no help at all.”

“I am sorry, okay? Half the time I don’t know what to think. I mean, why do you shock me when you touch me sometimes? What does it mean? When did you know that you were the Protector?”

“Okay, I knew the day I met your father. I saw it in his eyes and he tried to tell me in various ways. I also saw the link between them and us. In fact, it was Jono who figured it out.”

“Jono?”

“Yes, he made me realize a lot of things I would not have seen. What we could not figure out is what you needed protection from. *You* were certainly not telling me. We thought of asking your father, but I needed to hear it from you. But the first time we met, when I touched your hand, I thought you needed to be protected, after I decided that I wanted to sleep with you.”

“Why do you shock me?”

“Now that, I could not figure out. I hoped you would know.”

“Clayton, will you answer this question honestly? I need you to be honest, okay? Do you still want to make love to me?”

“What? Rebecca are you crazy? Of course. Gosh, woman. Do you know how difficult all this has been? Do you know I have never seen a woman twice without having sex with her? Do you know that you are staring at me, your black eyes flashing, and I want to take you to that bed? Do you know?”

“No, I don’t know. I don’t know anything. But I certainly know that I don’t want you to tell me about other women. Let me go, now.”

“Nooo.... Princess. You asked me to be honest. I will always be honest with you. Stop flashing your eyes at me.”

She lifted her head to him and he kissed her. They felt the difference, in their love and passion for each other. The fear was moving away, slowly. They made love and it was magical. Clayton got his ultimate fantasy, because the electric shocks vibrated through their bodies at least four times as they hungrily searched each other's bodies. They forgot about The Darkness, the questions, or the reason for the shocks. They needed to be with each other and they consumed each other. It was two in the afternoon before they came back to reality. Jonathan was banging on the door, worried that they had managed to do something stupid, like invoke lions, talking butterflies or the like.

"Are you two alright?"

"Yes, Jono, go away. We are fine, please, we will see you later, I promise."

Clayton shouted through the door, but he knew Jonathan would not go away until he had seen him. He had been so worried lately, he was taking no chances.

"Okay, I'm coming. One minute."

He went through the inter-leading door and opened his cottage for Jonathan. Rebecca was fast asleep and naked in her cottage.

"Jono, how are you? Sorry, things got a little crazy. We lost track of time."

"Yes, that is what I was afraid of, things going crazy. Are you alright?"

"Yes, of course, but we are going to need your help later. Where is Jackie?"

"Playing tennis with her friends. What has happened?"

"It is long story, but I think we are alright. She is so beautiful, Jono. She is everything I ever wanted in a woman, even in bed." He was whispering.

"Come let me make you some coffee. I am going to need your help and understanding once more. But this time, Rebecca and I will talk to you. We have had a long chat. If you thought talking butterflies was bad, wait until you see the creature that came over last night. Jono it is hectic."

"Creature, what creature? Clayton, don't tease me. You would not look so calm if some *creature* was here. Clayton, you bastard, you are teasing me."

"No, he is not. Jono, good morning. Stop whispering, because I can hear everything. And you Clayton, stop telling your friend about our sex lives okay? I'm going back to bed."

The men looked at each other and wanted to laugh.

"Creature? Tell me about the creature."

They took their coffee outside and closed the door. Jonathan sat with his mouth wide open as Clayton told him the story.

"So you see, things *did* get a bit crazy."

“But you look so happy? I don’t understand?”

“That’s because you have never been shocked to high heaven by the woman of your dreams.”

“Clayton, stop that. Stop that right now. I can hear you.”

Rebecca was awake and wearing jeans and a t-shirt. She looked fresh and relaxed.

“Rebecca, how are you?”

“Fine. I was in the shower, but I guess Big Mouth here told you everything?”

“Well, yes, pretty much. Rebecca, I want to ask you something. Can you show me the butterfly?”

Rebecca was silent for a bit, “okay, might as well, otherwise you will nag me. Come inside. But I will *not* shock you, is that clear?”

“Okay, fine, unlike Clayton here, I have no desire to be shocked at all. I don’t like creatures or talking butterflies or lions, sorry tigers. I like things in a world I understand, like a tattoo.”

When Jonathan had seen the tattoo, he was silent for a long time. He had never really believed that it existed and now he had to question all the other things he thought had been in Clayton’s head. He left soon afterwards and went to look for his wife.

“Well, Double J are going to have an entertaining conversation.”

Clayton was laughing.

“Clayton, you seem to think all this is funny. It is not. It is horrible and ugly. I don’t want to be treated like a freak.”

“Princess, it *is* funny. Don’t you see? All relationships have their problems and challenges. Double J can’t have children. Brad is in love with a woman who won’t speak to him for some reason he does not know. We have creatures. You see my point?”

“Yes, yes. Tell me about Brad. He had some accident and didn’t want to talk about it. He sounded unusually grumpy. What is going on?”

Clayton laughed. “He went to some meeting and says he was not paying attention. He has a few bruised ribs. But he met some woman who seems to be just like him. They had a fight, and he seemed really hurt, but I am not sure. He really likes the ladies, so, I don’t know. You know, he told me to stay away from you, and I guess I was hoping I would confess to him that I didn’t. He is going to be seriously pissed with me.”

She laughed out. “He told me to be very careful of you, that you are charming but not to be touched, under any circumstances. He is going to be pissed with me too, especially when I tell him that I need your touch.”

Clayton smiled.

“We will deal with him together. Let’s get back to us. I like the fact that I am your Protector. It feels good to a man to know he can do that. It makes me feel special. You are not a freak. Just a wonderful, intriguing woman. We will work it out. For now, let me enjoy the euphoria of knowing you finally trusted me enough to tell me the truth. Let my male ego reign just for a while, okay?”

“Okay. But I want you to be normal with me just for once. I want to have a normal relationship. Deal?”

“Deal.”

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## Chapter 17

When they got to the restaurant, they found Blake and Zane having an animated conversation. It seemed they knew the same people. John and Chad had been playing tennis with Jackie and were sitting on the patio having a drink with Marcus and Salina. *Good*, Rebecca thought. *The two couples are being friendly with each other.* She had worried that Chad and Blake would have one of their jealousy fights and it would have a long, drawn-out war of words.

“Hello, there! So good of you to join us,” Blake said.

“Yes, I’m starving. I need something to eat.” Clayton was off into the restaurant.

Zane was looking at Rebecca, “I was just having a scandal about you.”

“Really, what evil thoughts have been working in that brain of yours, hmm?”

“I was telling Blake about Spaz and how you put him in his place.”

“Oh, that creep. I don’t even want to think about it. And why, dear Zane, are you entertaining yourself at my expense?”

“Because we would love to see you and Stud-muffin there together. You are quite a dramatic couple. It *is* very entertaining.”

“We think it is an act of discrimination that such a gorgeous hunk is straight. It is an outrage.” Blake was saying.

“Oh you two, leave my man alone.”

“Possessive, aren’t we?” Clayton had come back in and was smiling.

“Do you guys want something to eat? Here are the menus. I had better eat something before I go crazy.”

They were all sitting at a table on the patio when Jonathan and Jackie arrived. Jackie was a little surprised. She had expected something to be different, but the couple were happily chatting with the other couples. It was a normal lunch between friends. She looked at Clayton and he was happily charming Chad and Blake and Rebecca was having some esoteric debate with Zane.

Jackie sat down and Jonathan stood around.

“Jono, not joining us?”

“Just in a minute. I need to talk to Clayton privately.”

Clayton excused himself and they walked away. They stood far away and the two of them were deep in conversation. Jonathan did not take these matters lightly. He wanted to see that his friend was okay. He needed to see it. Rebecca always looked calm, so he did not worry so much about her. Clayton tried to comfort his friend.

“Jono, think what it must be like for her. Imagine living with an ugly creature following you around. Imagine being afraid and not having someone to protect you from it. That is the perspective you must look through. I have no idea how I am supposed to protect her. It scares me to think about it. But I can’t let her know that. She needs to think it is okay. She just wants to feel a little happy, Jono, and I want to give her that. There are too many things we don’t know, don’t understand, but I thought I would ask George. He will help us. But for now, let us try to enjoy the moment.”

“Yes, you really are her Protector. But we are going to discuss this later.”

“Fine. But for now, let us go and celebrate your anniversary. What did Jackie say, by the way?”

“As usual, she was captivated by the details. She thinks it is the greatest romance story of all time.”

They were laughing when they got back to the others.

“Tonight, we have are having a proper, formal dinner. Today is officially our anniversary and we want a party, okay everyone? And you Clay, it is 7 o’ clock *sharp*, alright?”

“Okay, okay. I will be there on time and Jackie, I promise I will behave.”

Clayton’s eyes were laughing at her.

“I doubt that very much.”

Jackie laughed, hoping that he did *not* behave. His life was too interesting right now.

Zane had been watching the interaction between them. *Are they having an affair?* They seemed so cosy with each other. But he looked at Rebecca and she seemed completely comfortable with the way they interacted. Jonathan also seemed to accept it and was laughing with his wife. It seemed like a joke Double J shared. *Well, maybe they were those couples that switch.* He had seen how Jono had gone to Rebecca, touched her shoulder and asked her if she was alright. She had held his hand and nodded. It was a *very* intimate thing. *Yes, they must be swingers.* But his brain could not get round the idea that Clayton had an air of possessiveness around Rebecca. He watched her all the time, even when he was busy charming someone else. He always kept her within the range of his eyes. He would never allow another man near Rebecca in that way. He was sure he would kill him with his bare hands. He had that predator look about him, as if he would just pounce, and poof, the man would be dead. *Well, these straight people do some weird things. Always complicated. That is because they have no real issues to deal with, no rejecting parents, no rejecting friends and colleagues. They can afford the luxury of creating complex situations.* He looked at John, smiling beautifully at Rebecca. He loved that man and maybe he too would pounce on anyone who touched him.

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After the dinner party Clayton was keen to get away, to be alone with Rebecca. He wanted to make love to her, to talk to her, to share with her. She had been a little quiet during the party, looking exquisite in a long white dress, which contrasted so beautifully with her eyes and hair. It clung to her curves and even Blake had seemed excited at the sight of her.

Jackie, her blond hair swinging, was the belle of the ball. She wore a short gold dress, which shimmered with her as she walked. Jonathan was feeling so proud of himself. *How did I find such a beautiful woman?* He also wanted to leave, to enjoy his wife's bubbly enthusiasm and laughter. If only they could have a child. *She would be a wonderful mother, the way she accepts everyone gently, accepts their strange ways.* He marveled at how she had accepted all this business with Clayton and even seemed to enjoy it. He was a very lucky man. He looked at Clayton and realized that the man had also accepted his circumstances graciously. He was happily chatting to the men, laughing with them. If he was scared of the future, he did not show it. He had grown to love him like a brother and

worried about him all those years. Now, he worried more because his new challenges were unknown, unarticulated. *Where will it all end?*

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Rebecca and Clayton awoke on the Sunday morning and stayed in bed, watching the clouds play joyfully on the mountains. They had had a pleasant evening and The Darkness had not arrived. They had left the dinner party for their own private party in their cottage and Rebecca had enjoyed Clayton's sense of humour and funny anecdotes. They had chatted and made love and Rebecca was grateful that Clayton had made no reference to any of the issues they had to face. He seemed relaxed and lazy.

But Rebecca was a little apprehensive this morning. They had agreed that they would call her parents and discuss everything with them. For Rebecca, it was a reminder that their relationship was not normal, something she desperately wanted to deny. For her, this was a real threat to their relationship.

For Clayton, it was an endorsement that their relationship was not normal and he revelled in this knowledge. He loved Rebecca, and his fascination with her was fueled by the fact that she was so different and unpredictable. It took a great deal of self-discipline for him not to tease her about tigers and butterflies. He thought these complications simply enriched their relationship. He was eager to speak to her father, to establish an honest connection with a man he felt so bound to.

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## **Chapter 18**

After breakfast Jonathan and Jackie came to their cottage. They wanted to be there when Clayton spoke to Rebecca's parents and Rebecca was grateful for their presence. It made her feel like it was to be a normal discussion. When Clayton finally dialed the number, she was tense and agitated.

"Clayton, my boy, how are you?"

"Fine, George. Listen. I am placing the phone on speaker. Rebecca, Jono and Jackie are here. We need to discuss the matter of The Protector with you."

"Okay, but Clayton, please move your hand away from the button. It is creating too much static. Try your other hand. Great, that's perfect. Which hand was on the phone?"

“My left hand. George, what are you on about?”

“That is your powerful hand. It has too much untapped power and was creating too much static on the phone. Now, hello Sweetpea, Jono, Jackie.”

They all shouted a greeting at him.

“Okay, I take it you have *finally* got the message that you are my baby’s Protector?”

“Yes, but we are not sure what it means, exactly. It happened when I saw ...ur.. The Darkness thing.”

“Good, if you can see it, you are the stronger one. What did it do?”

“It dashed off somewhere.”

“Very good. It fears you.”

“George, we need to know, how can I protect Rebecca?”

“It is called the power of love. You have one part of it and Rebecca the other. Rebecca has the body of it, the vehicle of the power and you have the key, you know, the source. The Protector always has the source. You two have to put them together. There will be a white light and it will kill the thing. There is a problem. When you create the white light, both of you have to be ready. You have to be sure that you love each other enough to die. The power is so strong and hurts so much, you might die. You both have to be willing to take that risk. If not, the light will fade and The Darkness gets stronger. The light has to completely destroy it. It screams and shouts, then breaks up and it sounds like shattered glass. You must hear that before you stop the light. If not, it will be strong enough to kill both of you.”

Jonathan was horrified. “If they do not succeed, they die?”

“Yes, it could be worse. One of them could die so that the other one lives with the pain and grief.”

There was a long silence.

“Dad, we don’t understand what this means, but sometimes when Clayton touches me, we get shocked, you know, like an electric shock. What does it mean?”

The old man chuckled.

“Serves him right for touching my baby.”

Jonathan and Jackie laughed, but Clayton just glared at them.

“Dad, stop joking. Please.”

“Oh Sweetpea, I am so happy you finally accept that Clayton is the Protector. We were getting worried about you.”

“Dad. I am going to tell Mother to bind your tongue. What does it mean?”

“I am not sure because everything is so different with you two. I think Clayton has too much power and when it touches you, it goes a bit crazy. It means he is touching you in the ‘wrong’ place.”

“Dad, please, this is *not* the time for fatherly protection.”

“No, I mean he is not touching the right spot. Clayton, there is something about your left hand. You need to work that out. Check which hand causes the shock because that is the correct hand.”

“I am not sure I fully understand what Clayton needs to do, Mr. Raymond. I understand what you say about his hand, but what must he do?”

“I don’t know, son. But I will tell you how we did it. Rowena has an amethyst ring which has a missing part. Nana told us that the light can only be invoked when the other part is found. Long ago, before I met her, I found this strange ring with an ill-shaped amethyst on it. I kept it and when I met her, I saw that it was the missing part. We put the rings together and when the part fitted, the white light appeared. It near killed me. It is powerful and hurts like hell. You feel as if someone is tearing your skin off your whole body and ripping your heart out.”

Rebecca shivered and Jackie’s eyes were wide. The men looked down, pretending not to be affected by the old man’s vivid description.

“We need to work it out. Can we call you later? We need to deal with this stuff and will get back to you. Also, Rebecca is looking green here and I think she has had enough.”

“Yes, there are other things we need to discuss. Rowena has been working on a spell to break the curse, but she needs more time. Phone me when you have worked it out. Sweetpea, your Protector is there. Don’t be afraid. You must trust him and your own instincts. Also, let Double J help you. It is great to have the extra help. Phone me if you need to talk, okay baby?”

“Okay, yes, I will speak to you later. Bye, Dad.”

All of them sat silently for a while. There was so much to say, yet nothing to say. Jonathan was the first to eventually speak.

“What happens if you do nothing about it? If you simply scare it off every time?”

Clayton was agitated.

“That is not an option. I don’t care what happens, but I do know that Rebecca cannot, will not, spend the rest of her life having that *thing* coming to her and scaring her. That is not an option. I want it to stop, now.”

Rebecca spoke softly.

“It gets stronger every time it sees me. That is part of its source of power. Once I have seen it, or it comes close, I get tired and need to sleep. It just gets stronger and stronger. Nobody has ever left it to find out what happens. I don’t know what happens.”

“Rebecca, listen to me. That is not an option. We are not going to even consider that option.”

Clayton was starting to pace the room, and his eyes were starting to get that icy blue.

“Clayton, please, calm down. We need to consider all the possibilities. Also, stop trying to scare us. Sit down and stop being a tiger. It is not helping, okay?”

Jonathan adopted a firm tone and it seemed to register with Clayton

“Okay, sorry. I guess this is a bit difficult for me.”

Jackie was not really listening to them, and was watching the mountain, and then she said, “yes, Nana, yes. You are right.”

“What did you say?” Rebecca was shocked.

“Nana says you must stop arguing and focus on Clayton’s source of power and to tell him that the power lies in the palm of his hands.”

“Jackie, how do you know Nana?”

“She is the woman who told me not to cry when I couldn’t fall pregnant. She told me that it would be okay. She has short red hair and comes in my dreams. Who is she Rebecca? Do you know her?”

“Yes, of course. She was my grandmother. She was the one who got the butterfly done on me. Jackie, she was grandmother.”

Jonathan was looking white with shock. How could that woman be Rebecca’s grandmother? Jackie always spoke about how soothing the old lady had been in her dreams. At that stage, they had not met Rebecca, because it had happened about four years ago. They had only met Rebecca the following year.

“Jono, don’t look so devastated. She knew who Clayton was and I guess she wanted to protect him and those around him. She sent my butterfly to Clayton during his need. That is the way she was when she was alive. She fed hungry children and did magic to heal broken hearts. Relax. There is nothing weird about it.”

“Yes, I know. I am just surprised how we are all linked. It is a bit strange. But, we need to go to the original issue. The source of the power. The facts are...”

Clayton interrupted.

“It is this birthmark. I have never really looked it before, but it is the shape of an hourglass and that is the missing link to Rebecca’s butterfly. I think that is the answer.

Rebecca, do you remember when you asked me why I had ink on my hand and you touched it? You got shocked?”

She nodded. They all stared at his hand.

“Rebecca, let us see the butterfly, see if it fits.”

Rebecca was staring at his hand.

“I can’t believe I never realized that immediately. I mean. I asked you about it, because it bothered me so much. I feel so stupid. Okay, see if it fits.”

Clayton gently placed his hand on his butterfly. A sharp white flash of light appeared suddenly and flew to the ceiling. It clung there for a few seconds and then disappeared. They all stared at each other.

“Fuck, this is way beyond real. Clayton, you could kill someone. Gosh!”

Jonathan was hysterical. He was a logical, practical man. He did not believe in anything he could not see. He saw the light, so he had to believe. It rattled his neat, worldly brain.

Clayton gently placed his right hand on her butterfly and it soothed her skin. It felt cool and comforting.

“Clayton, it soothes. The right hand soothes.”

She started crying and he held her in his arms.

“Princess, it will be alright. You will see.”

He rubbed her back, with his right hand. *I hope this works, he thought, because she is falling apart. She is not coping.*

Jackie flung herself at her husband, crying.

“Oh Jono, this is too much. How can they cope with this? It is not fair. Jono, Nana came to me. I love her. Jono, I love you.”

He held his wife, thinking that she was falling apart and that they were all going crazy.

It was this image, of the two couples hugging, which confirmed Zane’s suspicion that they were a foursome. He had wanted to get a charger for his cellphone from Clayton and saw them through the window. *Well, I was right. Why is Double J in their cottage so early in the morning? Did they spend the night? Why are they all hugging? Was the session over? These straight people are too much. First they sleep with their best friend’s partner and then they go to their own partners for comfort. It is bloody ridiculous. All this nonsense because they have no real issues to worry about. Should I knock and disturb the foursome, or go away? No, I want to see what they say now that I have caught them.*

He knocked loudly. “Is anybody home?”

“Yes, Zane, come in, the door is opened.”

Clayton smiled. He gently pushed Rebecca to the bed, where Jackie and Jonathan were sitting. Jonathan turned to her and hugged her.

“Are you okay, Rebecca?”

“Yes, you big lug. Thank you for everything.”

She turned to Jackie and hugged her too, “and you too. Thank you, you have been wonderful and brave.”

Zane’s eyes were about to pop out of his head. *They say ‘thank you’ afterwards? Gosh, Clayton has definitely led these decent people astray! Poor Rebecca, she is so in love with him she will do anything for him.*

“Zane, please, come and join us,” Clayton said.

“Are you sure it is okay?” Zane asked. But he thought, *they want a gay boy now? Hell no. I don’t do that stuff, especially with a bunch of straight people. Hell no.*

“Yes, of course. I was about to make some coffee. Come, sit down. There is a chair over there. Rebecca, can you help me?”

She got up and went to him and he touched her arm, with his right hand and kissed her on her forehead.

“Let us make some coffee for our guests. I want to go up to San Pass today. I hear it is quite spectacular. I think we can have a picnic up there. The clouds are lifting nicely. Shall we have picnic on the top of the mountain, Princess?”

“Yes, that would be wonderful. I need some clean mountain air to clear my head. Come, we should all go. Let’s pack a picnic and have some fun.”

Zane thought, *she had better get some clean mountain air. She needs to clear her head for sure.*

~ ~ ~ ~

The view from the top of San Pass was breath-taking. The air was clean and crisp and all of them felt the power of love in the mountains. They all walked off in different directions, silently absorbing the pure beauty of their surroundings. It was a magical place and they were pleased they had all joined Clayton. They ate cheese and drank wine and huddled on blankets against the cool breeze that gently teased them. Clayton was lying on the ground, his eyes half-closed, next to Rebecca.

“Clayton, this is pure magic. I want to do it here. Right here, on this spot.”

She had been whispering, but they all heard her.

Blake laughed.

“She is quite the feisty one, isn’t she? I like a girl who knows what she wants. Wow, Clayton, that’s an offer a man can never refuse.”

The others had a raucous laugh, but Jonathan said seriously, “yes, she is right. This is the place. I am sure.”

Zane was beside himself. *Jono wants to join in? Right here, in public? He says it in public? There was no end to their lust.*

But he smiled and said nothing. Clayton did not reply. He simply looked at her, his eyes a dark blue color. He looked around him. *This is the place where our fate will be determined. We live or die.*

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## Chapter 19

They drove back reluctantly to their cottages. The enchantment of San Pass had made them intoxicated with warmth and love. Clayton and Rebecca were with Double J in the car and he was starting to get those dark blue eyes again.

“Okay, just ask, Clayton, let’s get it over with. I can’t stand the stress of waiting to hear what you want. Spit it out.”

“Okay, tell me why you know this is the right place.”

Rebecca did not hesitate.

“Nana always said that happiness comes from living in harmony with the environment. She applied the Chinese philosophy of *feng shui* to her life. She said the key was maintaining a balance between the elements. While we were up there, I saw what she had been telling us. We are the balance. You, the white tiger, are a symbol of the west and Yin energy. I, the green dragon, am a symbol of the east and Yang energy. You can see these symbols represented by the gentle hills and valleys and the winding road like the dragon’s tail. These forces, opposite but equal, co-exist as a complementary duality which is a powerful force of protection against evil. They encourage the positive life energy. That is what this place represents to me. A co-existence of these energies, the balance of nature. Also, I like the open space and it makes me feel powerful.”

“And what else?”

“No, that’s all.”

“Rebecca, you are starting to piss me off. What else?”

She was quiet for a while, then said softly, “if we have to die, I would rather it happened at the most beautiful place on earth.”

Jonathan and Jackie were too stunned to comment and Clayton simply looked out the window. Nobody spoke the rest of the way.

It was late afternoon when they arrived at their cottages. The other couples were sitting in the pub, continuing the fun they had enjoyed at the top of the mountain. Jonathan walked in and told them that the ladies were tired and they would join them later. Zane simply rolled his eyes. *God help us. They were at it again.*

They met Jonathan at his cottage, where they made their plans. It was decided that it would be done the next night, since the other couples would have left and Rebecca wanted one night alone with Clayton. They would leave a little early and stay at the top until it was late. Jonathan and Jackie went to join their guests for dinner and told them that Clayton and Rebecca were too tired and would see them in the morning.

Clayton sat on the edge of the bed. “Rebecca, you need to be more open with me. I don’t want to have to extract your thoughts and feelings from you. I need you to tell me, trust me, okay?”

“You are starting to behave like my parents. Before I say something, you already know or suspect. I do not like it. I don’t want you in my head.”

“Why not?”

“Because some thoughts are my own, Clayton. They are fears or insecurities or the like.”

“Princess, you do not understand. You must trust me with your life, your fears, insecurities and the like. We can’t do this tomorrow if you have doubts. It is too dangerous.”

“Clayton, I do love you with all my heart. But I can’t help but think that if you die, then I would have caused it. I would have to live without you. I think about it and then I think it is easier simply to live with the damn thing. Are you so sure, that you have no doubts, no fears?”

“I have the same fears and doubts. What if we are not strong enough? What if we are too strong and hurt each other? Your father tells me that it is about balance. We don’t know what that is. I have never had balance in my life. Everything has always been too much or too little. He says we must trust our instincts. Until a few weeks ago, I did not believe I had instincts. But Rebecca, the thing that makes it okay for me is knowing that I love you.

I know that if I have to die so you can have the ‘normal life’ you so desperately desire, then I will die, gladly. I love you and that keeps me going.”

“Oh Clayton, you make it sound so easy.”

“That’s because it is. Listen to your father. He had told us over and over. It is the power of love. If you still don’t understand, come here and I will show you.”

She slid onto the bed next to him, but he jumped up, his eyes glazed and moved to the door. “Rebecca, get down over there. Stay there until I call you.”

He opened the door and she heard it. It was still some distance away, but Clayton had already sensed its presence. He stood outside, his arms stretched out before him. It had just arrived and realized he was outside. He roared loudly. It squealed and scurried away. Clayton stood there, his body tense, ready to pounce. It was gone. He slowly relaxed and went inside.

“I am going to get that bastard. How dare he come to my woman? I am going to fry him.”

He was agitated and pacing.

“Rebecca, it has got to go. I have had it. That’s it. Whatever the cost. I am going to get it.”

She was sitting on the floor, hiding her face and he realized that he was frightening her more with his raving. He bent down and pulled her up.

“Come, it is okay now.” He held her and she relaxed.

“Clayton, I love you so much. I can’t bear you going outside to that *thing*! I was so scared, the way it shrieked.”

“Rebecca, are you feeling tired?”

“No, not this time. I think you got it before it had time to get to my energy. Thank you Clayton.”

“Come let’s go to bed. We are going to need all our energy tomorrow.”

“Okay, but Clayton, I want you to make love to me tonight, just in case....”

“No, Rebecca, do not think about that. I will make love to you because you are the most beautiful woman in the world. That’s all. Not just in case things go wrong. I don’t want to be loved by you out of desperation. I want your desire and tonight, we will make ‘normal’ love. I promise I will not shock you. You want normal, I am going to give you normal.”

He went over to his bag and pulled out a Band-Aid.

“There. Put that on my hand so there will be no shocking. Also, we need to save it for tomorrow.”

She laughed. "So normal love making means you will wear a Band-Aid?"

"Yes, my sweet. Now come, let us finish what we started before that rude interruption."

Their love-making was bitter sweet, both knowing that this might be their last night together.

~ ~ ~ ~

They drove up the long, treacherous road up San Pass talking about work and the things that happened that weekend. They gossiped about Blake and Chad and their jealous rages and made other small talk. It could have been any trip made by a couple on a pleasant afternoon. Jonathan and Jackie had insisted on coming, but they refused. What if something went wrong and one of them was hurt? They would never live with the guilt. Jonathan had been frantic. The road is long, winding and treacherous. What if it rained? They would never be able to drive back. It would be dark. What if they could not see clearly? It was pitch black in the night and the road was a death trap in daylight hours. Clayton had brought his four-wheel drive vehicle, but Jonathan knew that he abused it and drove through horrendous conditions all over. He had never really cared for any of his cars and this one was no different. What if something went wrong with his car? What if they were injured and could not drive back for help? What if one of them needed medical attention? They were going to a spot at the top, about two hours from their cottages. What if they needed help? Clayton and Rebecca had flatly refused. They were not prepared to take the risk.

When they got to the top, Clayton sat on the grass and Rebecca sat in front of him.

"Clayton, I don't know what to say. I love you, whatever happens."

He kissed her neck.

"What will happen is that you will reward me later. I like the smell of jasmine on your skin. It turns me on."

His cell phone was ringing. "Hello, Jono, what do you want now?"

"Just checking in. What are you doing?"

"I was about to kiss her before you interrupted."

"Save you energy, for God's sake. You will need it. Phone me as soon as you can."

"Okay."

He hung up the phone.

~ ~ ~ ~

Jonathan and Jackie were so anxious. It seemed so far-fetched. Jonathan was really starting to doubt his sanity now. “I would never have imagined that Clayton would be sitting on a stake-out for a creature in the middle of a treacherous mountain, in all my life.”

“I know, Jono. They are so brave. They are being very good about it. They act as if it is the most normal thing in the world. I hope this is going to work out. I hope they will be alright.”

“I know, I know. I wish we could do something for them, make it easier. But the saddest thing is that all they will manage to do if they succeed, is to have a live together, that’s all.”

“How do you mean?”

“Well, what they are doing today is for their own benefit. If they have children, it starts all over again. That is the saddest thing for me, that it is a temporary measure, that’s all.”

“Oh Jono, I never thought about that. I’m glad, for once, you had the decency not to be logical and point it out to them. It might have made them give up. Thank you, darling.”

“It’s my pleasure. Rebecca is fully aware of it and that is why she has been so sullen about it. She knows that her parents did this and now their daughter, a vicious cycle they cannot break. Rebecca knows, but she loves Clayton enough to make the effort.”

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## Chapter 20

The night was fast approaching and Rebecca sat calmly on the blanket. Clayton was on the side of his car, waiting impatiently. *What if the thing does not show?* Rebecca had said it always came if she was outside in the dark. *Well, it is getting pretty dark and it is not here.* It had to come, because he could not bear to do this again. Today was either the beginning or the end. Rebecca was chanting slowly.

“Come to me, oh power of darkness. Come to me. I surrender to your power, come to me. Come to me, I surrender to your power.”

She visualised it and continued chanting. Then she heard the hissing. It was just as strong, but less agitated. It was getting closer and closer. Clayton moved silently in the dark, a tiger hunting his prey and not a sound could be heard from him.

Rebecca knew he was close by, so she rose to her feet. It was flying high in the air now, its yellow eyes like the lights of a small aircraft. It was moving cautiously towards her and she begged it to come to her.

“Please, power of darkness, come to me. I surrender to your power.”

It moved closer and Clayton rose behind her. He stood next to her on her right and placed his left hand on their butterfly. The light came up, like a beam of sunlight in the night sky. The Darkness was so shocked, it stopped flapping. And with his right hand raised high, he directed the light to the creature. It ducked the light, but swayed slightly. Clayton kept directing the light to it, as it moved to the left then the right. He noticed the pattern, and realized that it could only move from left to right and then back again. It was like a moth, attracted to a flame then repelled by it. He directed the light to the right, then the left and suddenly to the left again and caught it in the light. It flapped and shrieked and Clayton let out a deafening loud roar. He roared and roared, like a tiger trapped and angry. It was fighting him, tearing at his back with deep, long strokes, the sound of its sharp claws were scraping and tugging at his flesh. Clayton knew that it was getting into his mind and tearing away at him, because he saw it up there, some distance into the air. It was using his own mind to destroy him. It had tapped into him and was using his anger against him. *The power of love, that's what I need. The power of love.* He just roared and roared and it continued. Rebecca started chanting something he did not understand. Her voice grew louder and louder, until she was screaming. Clayton's pain was forcing his hand to slide off her back, but the creature had also stopped flapping. Even though it had stopped tearing at his back, he still felt himself weakening. The pain had been too much for him. He was slipping away, slowly, slowly.

“Clayton, I love you. Stay with me Clayton and destroy The Darkness.”

Her voice was strong and loud and it suddenly shot through his body.

*She loves me, she loves. I am her Protector.*

Fuelled by these thoughts, he started regaining his strength and his hand firmed on her back. The light grew brighter and spread its brilliance openly across the dark sky. It looked like it could have been a bright, sunny day on that dark mountain sky.

Rebecca screamed at the creature.

“Creature of darkness, Power of darkness. You are banished to the abyss of darkness. Be gone with you, there is nothing for you here. Be gone, never to return. You are banished to the abyss of darkness. Be gone. There is nothing for you here.”

It was not moving at all, its stillness contrasting the brilliant power of the light. It seemed an eternity, the stillness in the light. Rebecca was getting tired now. The light sucked her energy from within her and she fought to visualize herself strong and sure. Doubts crept in her mind. *Is Clayton okay? Why is he in pain? Why have I put him through this? Will he survive? Oh God, what have I done to the man I love? Have I sent him to his death?*

“Oh God, Clayton, I am losing my strength,” she whispered.

“I love you, Rebecca. That is your strength. I love you, now and forever.”

At those words there was a large explosion in the sky and pieces of light splashed across the sky in leaps and bounds, like a giant fireworks display. Then the shattering glass started. It was loud and persistent, piercing the pure mountain air. Fragments of light hit the ground and disappeared on impact. It was a dramatic scene and it went on and on, as if there had been many creatures in that light.

Suddenly it was quiet. Clayton directed the light around in the sky, but saw nothing. Slowly he removed his hand from Rebecca and the light stopped. Rebecca felt the last gasp of energy in her body, turned to him and collapsed onto his chest. He took her to the car and placed her on the seat and turned the lights on. Her face was white and drained and she was breathing slowly, faintly.

He lifted his head and felt a wave of dizzy nausea hit him from his belly. He moved away from the car to breathe and felt the first wave of nausea rise up in his chest. Unable to control his body, he puked. He was half bent on the ground and could not raise himself. He kept puking, a green bile rising from the depths of his body. He saw the images fly through his body, images of his pain, of his anger, of Suzanne, her father, their baby, the accident and her diary. His back was burning with pain and when the nausea stopped, he went back to the car, Rebecca was still breathing slowly. He sat down on the ground, enjoying the cool, soothing relief of the grass. He was breathing hard now, trying to fight the dizzy spells that threatened to engulf him. He fell to the ground, his hand grasping his stomach. He tried to move, but could not. His back felt raw and scourged. He needed to move. He was urging himself to get up off the ground to help Rebecca when he lost consciousness. That is how they remained. Rebecca was on the seat of his car, pale and lifeless, her legs dangling out and her Protector was unconscious on the ground, clutching his belly.

~ ~ ~ ~

Rebecca walked slowly through the long dark passage. There was faint light coming from the end and she wanted to get to it. She was lost. She did not know how she had got here. *Where is Clayton?* She moved further and further down the passage, her body feeling light as she moved. She saw that the light was coming from a closed door and she opened the door. She was shocked at what she saw. There was Malcolm still fourteen years old, crying and afraid.

“I love you Rebecca, so why do you want to hurt me?”

She tried to go to him, but as she touched his shoulder, he vanished. She was startled and backed out of the room. She opened another door further down the passage and it was the same. Here sat Reynolds, a boy she had met at eighteen. She had liked him so much and he had liked her too. He was also crying, asking her the same question. Rebecca left the room and hesitated. Should she open the next door? Would it be the same? She stood, confused and afraid. Tears were rolling down her face. *What is happening to me? Where is Clayton?* She moved to the next door, hoping Clayton was there. It was the same as the others and she was bitterly disappointed. She rushed down the passage, opening all the doors, hoping that Clayton would be there. Each time there was some man from her past and he was crying. Rebecca was hysterical. *Oh no, I have lost Clayton.*

“Clayton, Clayton!” she was screaming.

She opened the last door and saw her patient Carl, crying also.

“Rebecca, why did you leave me? Why did you leave me? I wanted to show you what happened. I wanted to tell you that it was my fault that James died. I hit the horse, we were playing. Did you leave because you knew? You also hate me? Rebecca, please come back, I am sorry. I did not mean it. It was an accident, I swear. Please come back.”

As she moved further into the room, he disappeared. Her frustration and pain engulfed her and she sat on the floor, her face in her hands and cried. It was hopeless and there was nothing to do. This had been the last door and Clayton was not there. She had lost him. She had known she would, like all the others. She had known. Why should she have his love? Rebecca just cried and cried.

“Please no more. I can’t take it. No more pain, please. Let the pain go away.”

She heard a movement, a slight movement as if someone else was in the room. She lifted her head and saw the butterfly.

“Oh beautiful butterfly, where is Clayton? Please, take me to Clayton.”

It flapped its wings and she noticed it still had the missing patch of color. It gently glided out of the room and Rebecca rushed onto her feet and followed it furiously. She was

blinded by the darkness. There were no more doors, but she heard it move ahead of her and she followed the butterfly blindly. Suddenly, she was floating, and there was a faint light. She was flying like the butterfly. She looked down and there was Clayton, lying on the ground, clutching his belly.

“Clayton, Clayton, what are you doing? Clayton?”

He did not answer, or seem to hear her. He lay still on the ground. She looked around and saw her body, lying helplessly on the car seat. What had happened? Why was she floating above him? He was so still.

“Oh butterfly, take me to the place he has gone to, please. He is dead, isn’t he? Take me to him. I will not live without him.”

The butterfly went down to the car and inside and then she heard his cell phone ringing. Clayton did not move, but it rang and rang.

“Clayton!” She screamed. He started to move, feeling around for his cell phone. Rebecca smiled. He always kept it near him. *Where does he think he was, in bed?*

Clayton was moving out of the darkness. He could hear the sound of something familiar. He listened carefully and realized that it was his cell phone. It was ringing. *Oh, go away, he thought. I am sleeping. The world must realize that I also need to sleep. It is probably some anxious client. Go away.* But the ringing was insistent and he thought he had better answer it or switch it off, or he would get no peace to sleep. He felt around for it, but it was not there. He realized that he was not in his bed, because he could feel the grass and the soft moisture of the dew that was settling.

“Where am I...?”

Then he saw her, his beautiful Rebecca, floating above him, smiling. He suddenly remembered what had happened and tried to get to his feet. *What is Rebecca doing up there, anyway?*

“Rebecca! What are you doing? Come here, help me. Rebecca, stop smiling. This is not funny. It hurts like hell and I need you. Come, Princess, help me.”

He heard a flapping sound coming from his car and was horrified to see her body, lying exactly as he had left it.

“Rebecca, what is going on?”

*Oh God, is she dead?* Then he rose suddenly to his feet. *Oh God, Rebecca is dying or dead. No, she is still here.*

“Rebecca,” he spoke to her floating up there, smiling. “Rebecca, please, don’t go. Stay with me.”

She just smiled and he could see that she could not hear him. The butterfly was flapping furiously at him. He turned and looked at it. It was flapping on her body, urgently and wildly.

“What, what? What is happening to Rebecca?”

It flapped and flapped, moving up and down her body.

“God, what the fuck does this mean? I don’t have time for this. I want Rebecca. I want her to come down from there, back into her body.”

“Rebecca! Rebecca! Come down *now*.”

Then he realized what the butterfly was trying to say to him. *Of course, he needed to focus on her body.* Rebecca has told him that his right hand was soothing, cooling. *Okay, this better work or somebody is going to pay.*

Clayton rushed to her cold, pale body and rubbed her slowly. His back was still burning with pain, but he could think of nothing but getting Rebecca down from there, floating, alone in the air, smiling indulgently at him.

He was crying now.

“Rebecca, Princess, please, don’t leave me. I need you, please. Come to me, please. I promise you I will do anything you want. Just come down from there.”

He turned her body around and touched her butterfly. It was warm. He rubbed it a bit, but still nothing happened. Should he complete the butterfly again? What if the light came again? What if he invoked the creature again? But he had no other choice and he placed his hand tentatively on the spot and completed her butterfly. Nothing happened, but then he saw the butterfly, moving in front of him, for the first time complete. Its blue patch was not missing. He turned Rebecca around, laying his right, healing hand on her heart. *Oh God, please, bring her back to me.* He looked up and she was no longer floating. He looked down at her and she was still lifeless and pale. Then she moved suddenly, as if choking. He looked at her and her eyes were still closed.

“Rebecca? Princess? Are you back? Rebecca?”

He saw the tears spilling out of the sides of her eyes and he knew she was alive.

Clayton held her and cried, but Rebecca’s body was still. The tears just rolled from her eyes. He rubbed her all over and eventually, he felt the tingling sensation of her energy being restored. He sat for a long time, rubbing and rubbing, every inch of her body, crying as he felt her slowly coming back to him. It was getting light, the first rays of the sun peeking through mountains.

“Clayton, I am so tired. I want to sleep.”

Clayton shook her, excited and afraid of the sound of her voice.

“No! Not now Princess. Later, okay? Come on, talk to me. Hold me please.”

She opened her eyes and looked at him.

“Did you answer the phone? Who was it?”

He laughed and held her.

“Oh Rebecca, you are back. I love you, I love you!”

She moved slowly and hugged him and he winced at the pain as she touched his back.

“Clayton, are you okay? What’s wrong?”

She was wide awake now.

“It’s my back. It hurts like hell. But I am fine. Rebecca, listen to me. I love you and you are never to leave me again, understood?”

“Yes, Clayton, I love you too. But what is wrong with your back? Turn, let me see.”

He turned round and she lifted his t-shirt. She gasped in shock at what she saw. He had long bright red welts that looked like he had been whipped repeatedly.

“Oh Clayton, baby. What has happened to you? Oh Gosh, Clayton, are you okay?”

“Yes, I am okay. Really, it just hurts. Don’t cry, please. We are okay. Do you realize that we are okay? Princess, we have survived.”

He was smiling now, his azurite eyes beaming.

“Oh Clayton, I thought you were dead. You were lying there, curled up and not moving. Yes, we are alive. Yes! Yes! Yes! Clayton, smell the air, feel the breeze. *We are alive.*”

She got out of the car, raising her arms up to the sky.

“Thank you. Thank you, thank you!”

She turned to Clayton.

“Thank you for loving me so much! Thank you.”

Clayton smiled, his beautiful princess was back. He silently thanked the gods.

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## Chapter 21

They both stopped when they realized his phone was ringing again. Clayton got up and answered.

“Jono, how are you?”

“Clayton! Clayton, thank God! Man, don’t you know to answer your phone? What the fuck do you mean, how am I? Clayton? Where is Rebecca?”

“Oh Jono, we are both fine. We *did* it! Can you believe it? We did it. Wait, let Rebecca say hello.”

“Jono, we are fine. It is a beautiful, beautiful day! Tell Jackie that we are fine.”

“Where are you?”

“We are at the top, where we had the picnic. We did not really get much opportunity to move and do some sightseeing, you know.”

Clayton was starting to get his sense of humour back.

“Clayton, this is *not* the time to be funny. Jackie and I are about fifteen minutes away. When you did not answer the phone, we came up. The guard at the gate gave us a hard time, said it was too early, but we insisted that we left something behind before and did not want anyone to get there first. He was sympathetic, especially when we asked if he would want go up and fetch it for us. He was still sleepy and didn’t fancy a trip up the mountain.”

“Thank you, Jono, you are a real star. Also, sorry about not answering before. I was a bit busy. I know you will forgive me when I tell you about it.”

“Okay, see you shortly.”

“Princess, we are having company. Double J will be here shortly. Are you okay? You look a bit worried.”

“Yes, I am, but I guess we can talk later. Your back looks terrible, Clayton. You look like you have been through hell.”

He thought, *I have, especially when you tried to leave me*. But he said nothing. Rebecca did not seem to be aware of what had happened. Maybe later, they would discuss it. For now, he wanted to hold her, know that she was real and alive. They sat huddled together, on the grass, watching the sun rise. There was nothing to say.

That is how they were when Jonathan and Jackie found them. The two of them were holding onto each other, watching the sun gliding into the sky. They looked like a couple having a quiet, romantic picnic.

“Jono, Jackie!”

Rebecca was on her feet. She hugged them as if she was seeing them for the first time. They hugged her tightly, as if they had lost her for a long time. They tried to hug Clayton, but he backed away and showed them his back. Jackie screamed and Jonathan’s eyes filled

with tears. What had these two been through? She looked as pale as a ghost, and he, well, had been beaten to nothing. But, they looked happy.

“Thank you so much for coming. It is the most precious thing you could do for us. It was completely weird, Jackie. It was so weird.”

Rebecca was crying.

“If nothing else, I felt his love. It kept me going when I was tired and drained. He kept me going. Oh Jackie, it was so intense.”

Clayton smiled.

“Intense? It was the most painful experience of my life. But it is true, what your father said. It is the love that keeps you going. I could feel you, even though you did not talk to me. I could feel your thoughts and your doubts. I will definitely deal with those doubts later.”

Rebecca laughed.

“Oh Clayton, it is so good to hear you fight with me.”

They told Jonathan and Jackie everything that happened and not once, until they had finished, did Jonathan ask a single logical question. Jackie just cried the whole time. They sat there, for a long time in silence, before Jonathan got his wits back.

“That is the most awful thing I have ever heard. I don’t understand one thing, Rebecca. Why were you floating in the air, why were there two of you?”

“I don’t know. I didn’t really realize it was happening. I just found myself in another place and then the butterfly took me to Clayton. I saw my body, but I didn’t register. It was the cell phone ringing that seemed to bring me back, slowly.”

“The cell phone, well that’s another thing. You see, we were up all night, waiting for you to call. Nothing happened and at about four, Jackie got the hysterics. She kept shouting, ‘we have to phone *now*, this minute.’ She was getting completely out of control. I did not know what to do. We had phoned your parents, Rebecca and they said we must not phone because it might break the power of the light. I didn’t know what to do, but Jackie went berserk, so we phoned.”

“Yes, it was the butterfly. It was bringing me back to Clayton. I thought he was dead and then I saw him move. I couldn’t find my way back down the passage to him and then it came and guided me. It was really odd, though, because it was the first time I saw the full colour. The patch was not missing. It was so comforting. Then, I felt this soothing feeling as I was gliding along. I felt safe and tingly, and then I saw Clayton, looking at me. I just don’t know how all that happened. It was vague and dark.”

They were reluctant to leave the mountain and sat there for a long time. They phoned Rebecca's parents and Rebecca cried all over again as they told her parents what had happened. Her father, however, laughed at them, at their foolishness of going up the mountain, not waiting for their help.

"Clayton my boy, I would have told you not to think angry thoughts, or have any negative feelings. It always turns your anger against you. Remember that it was created to work on your negative feelings, as a way to kill the love. We would have told you to affirm your love to each other, loudly, right at the beginning. It would have saved you all that pain. It hurts like hell, doesn't it?"

He was laughing at Clayton and could hear his wife shouting at him to behave. He ignored her, because he was so relieved that his daughter and her somewhat rash Protector had survived the ordeal. He was too happy to be concerned about his wife's angry tone.

"The bad news, my boy, is that the electric shocks have stopped. But, I will teach you how to summon that power when you are better. But don't tell Rebecca I told you that, because she will kill me."

Clayton laughed.

"Thank you. I don't think I will need that for a while. It hurt like hell and I don't want to remember."

Rebecca's mother cried and spoke for a long time to her daughter. She told Rebecca about her guilt and how she had not wanted her child to go through this. She spoke about her doubts and fears and the pain of watching her beautiful daughter, walking around the world 'dazed in pain' and cried for her daughter's lost years.

When they eventually left the mountain, it was two in the afternoon. Clayton and Rebecca were tired and starving, but so happy to be alive and together. Rebecca drove Clayton's car, because the pain was starting to sting his back and drove slowly to avoid the bumpy road which might hurt him. Jonathan drove behind them, while Jackie phoned around, re-scheduling all their appointments. It was Tuesday afternoon and they all should have been back at work. They had decided to stay for one more night to recover from the ordeal.

When they got to the gate some 3 hours later, the guard was shocked and horrified when he saw what Double J had 'forgotten' on the mountain the day before. *These tourists are crazy. They forgot their friends? Why didn't they just come down on their own? It is so strange how these people thought.* He looked at the couple and saw how tired they were.

*Small wonder, spending a night up there. It was freezing cold, dark and a little spooky. Just last night he thought he heard some wild animal screaming up in the mountains. It must have scared them half to death. Served them right for thinking they could spend a night up there. These tourists. No sense at all.* He shook his head and let them go. He had seen those two yesterday. All loving to each other. Now, they looked like they could sleep for a week.

*Next time I will pay more attention to people who go up there in the afternoon.* But then, what would he have done? He hated the road up to that mountain. It was long and windy and sometimes if you were not careful, your car slipped off the path. *No, there is nothing to be done. Let the tourists suffer for their foolishness.*

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## Chapter 22

It was two weeks before the welts started fading from Clayton's back. He was starting to feel normal again and the memory of the pain was easing. He had also stopped waking up in the night, waiting to hear The Darkness. He had refused to let Rebecca sleep alone in her house, for fear it might come back with a vengeance. They spent some nights at his apartment and others at Rebecca's house. He loved having her curl up in his arms at night, purring quietly. *She sounds more like a content Cheshire cat than a dragon to me.* He also liked the way she had changed towards him. She was less tense and seemed happier to allow him into her head. She had hated that, but now, she seemed to accept it. She made him laugh when she was angry at him, sprouting rude words in her mind, trying to hide them from him and realising that he knew that she was thinking he was an arrogant swine, or something, she would change her mind, and try to think of something else. Her eyes would flash, and he loved her for it. But he knew that she was saddened by something. He felt it in her heart, but she had been careful to exclude him from those thoughts. He knew she did not fully trust him and it angered him a little. Her father had told him not to push her, but to charm her and that is what he would do.

Rebecca felt very happy. She loved him, in a dreamy kind of way, the way he paced when he was agitated and laughed at her. She loved him, in his arrogant, self-assured way. He was so busy thinking he had tapped into her mind, he never considered the fact that she

had long tapped into his mind. It was her secret, for now. She smiled as she watched her favorite patient, Carl, patting the horse. She could not believe what a breakthrough she had made with him, dealing with his feelings of guilt. He was all right now and she felt saddened by the fact that he would not be seeing her again. She felt the pain, the longing for a child of her own, but knew that it was not to be. Clayton did not want to have children, so she shut the thought from her mind. She had to learn not to think about this when they were together, because he would surely know. She cleared her head and got up to leave, as she was meeting Clayton for lunch.

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It was a pleasant day and Clayton wanted one of his picnics on the lawn. She was glad she had agreed, because they sat there, laughing and joking, the warm sun caressing their skins.

“What is it, Rebecca?”

“My mother phoned. It seems like she has found a way to unbind the spell. I don’t know, I just don’t know. What do you think?”

He was staring at her, thinking, *oh God, not again, not the pain again*. But he said, “Let’s hear what they have to say. At least let’s hear them out.”

“Okay, but I don’t think there is any pain. They want us to go down there this weekend, to discuss it. I think it is just an excuse for my father to spend time with you. He really likes having another Protector around. It’s clearly a man thing. Also, he said he promised to share some secret with you. He refused to tell me, saying there are some things a man must do alone. Now, what is that secret?”

Clayton smiled, thinking, *I quite miss all that shocking, actually, maybe the old man is right, get back the power*, but he said, “oh Rebecca, it is just something men talk about. Nothing to worry about.”

Zane was driving along the road in the park when he saw them, talking so intently on the grass. *How loving, how normal. If only people knew about them and their perversion*. He had tried to tell John about it, but John had told him that he had a wild imagination. He remembered how they had fought when he had insisted. John had accused him of projecting his own desire for a foursome with Blake and Chad, as an older couple, to substitute for his longing for a father figure. It had been a bitter fight, because he had

accused John of wanting to be with Chad and they had forgotten the real reason they had fought. Anyway, he knew what he knew.

He stopped his car and went over to them. At least he can entertain himself a little more with them. They saw him approaching and changed the subject.

“Zane, hello. We haven’t seen you since The Sanctuary. How have you been?”

Clayton was charming and kind.

“You two lovebirds. Whatever happened to you? I heard you stayed up a little longer?”

“Yes, it was so wonderful that the four of us thought an extra night would be great.”

Zane thought, *so four of them stayed. I bet it was great.* He was definitely right about these people, no matter what John said.

Clayton thought, *well it is sort of true, despite all the pain, that night with Rebecca had been wonderful.*

Rebecca looked away from them, thinking, *is that all this man thinks about?*

Zane chatted a bit, but got back to his favorite topic.

“So, Double J stayed behind as well?”

“Yes”, Clayton said. “I don’t think they trust me too much, so they stayed to take care of us. Wasn’t that sweet of them?”

*Sweet indeed!* Zane was thinking. He left soon afterwards, wondering what other evidence John would need to be convinced. *He is so stubborn sometimes.*

“Princess, do you get the impression that Zane is a little too interested in our movements?”

“Yes, I think they all have naughty thoughts for you. They call you azurite eyes and stud-muffin.”

He laughed at the description, as he imagined the context in which that would have come up.

“Rebecca, I would like to go to your parents this weekend. It would be good to see them. I feel a bit strange thinking about the things that have happened, because I believe it is just my imagination. Your father makes me feel normal, you know. That all this is not strange. So, we go?”

“Yes, I would love to see them. But, Clayton, if there is any pain, or creatures, I am out. I will not take that risk again, okay?”

“Well, let’s hear what they have to say. Anyway, we will talk later. I have to meet Jono later for a drink. He still worries about us.”

~ ~ ~ ~

But Jonathan was also worried about himself. He remembered how strange Jackie had been, since the weekend in the mountain. She kept asking him ‘Jono, what does it mean that I knew when I had to phone Clayton? How are we connected to this?’

He had considered this question, but had come to no logical answer. He did not know what it meant and did not really want to think about the fact that they might be linked. He explained it to himself that it was because she had always had a deep, protective affection over Clayton. He had been happy with this explanation, until last night, when she woke him and told him that she had been talking to the butterfly. He had been completely horrified. *Dear God, was there no end to this? Now his wife was talking to the butterfly? Why? Look what happened to Clayton.* He had started out by talking to the butterfly. Was it their turn? Has that bloody creature simply moved to them? No, there would be no talking to butterflies. No way. He was not having his back torn to pieces by some bat. Worse still, what if he was not Jackie’s Protector? Would she fall in love with some tiger man? Not a chance. He was not losing his wife to some man who growled and changed the color of his eyes.

He could never compete with that. No way. So, he shouted at her, refusing for her to explain what the butterfly had said.

“No, No, No, Jackie. There are *no* talking butterflies in this house. Do you hear me? We are not insane. No talking butterflies, no tigers, not creatures, *never*. Is that clear? Is that clear? Next time it comes, you tell it to bugger off, is that clear?”

“But Jono, darling, it told me that...”

“No. What is the matter with you? No. I said no. I don’t care what it said because, my dear, there are no talking butterflies in this house. Not today, not ever!”

She had been so angry that she had stormed out of the bedroom and slept in the spare room.

In the morning, she had screamed at him, telling him that he was a closed-minded old fool who did not know what was good for him. She had left him there, knowing he did not have a car that day. He had to take a taxi to work and he was seriously pissed off and worried.

“Can you believe it Clayton, that she thinks I don’t know what is good for me?”

Clayton threw back his head and laughed. He was laughing so hard, he almost spilled his beer.

“Oh Jono, you *are* a closed-minded fool who does not know what is good for you. There are no tigers or creatures for you. She wanted to tell you that she was pregnant. *The butterfly* told her last night and she went to the doctor this morning. She phoned Rebecca this afternoon to tell her.”

“What, Clayton. What did you say?”

“Your wife is pregnant.”

“But that is not possible. We have tried *forever* and no doctor has been able to help us.”

“I can’t explain it, but she is pregnant. Rebecca says it is a gift from Nana, the *dead woman*, Jono, who wanted to thank you for all your help.”

Clayton was smiling now, the way he always did when he was teasing Jonathan.

“No, it is not possible. Clayton, don’t tease me. Please, not now. Telling me that a dead woman made my wife pregnant is not helping. Stop it, tell me properly.”

“Okay, your wife is pregnant, by some miracle, it is true. She is seriously pissed off with you right now. I don’t think you should be sitting in a pub drinking with me. I think you need to go home, with some flowers, and *beg* for her forgiveness.”

“Okay, you are right. I don’t know what to think. I feel like a big oaf. God, she is going to make me pay for this for a long time. I went crazy and shouted at her. She is going to make me pay for the rest of my life. Yes, I had better go and get those flowers and that fancy chocolate she loves so much. Boy, have I got trouble on my hands.”

He dashed off home, feeling a bit apprehensive. Was it possible that she was pregnant? Could it finally be true? It was too good to be true. She had wanted a baby so long and it had pained him so long, he could not bear the possibility that it could be true. But when he got home, she was lying on their bed, crying and he knew. He held her and they cried. Jonathan was a very happy man. Later, when they talked, he asked her what she thought about the coincidence of this pregnancy at the time of all the ‘activities’ in Clayton’s life.

“Darling, it has nothing to do with him. I think it happened because I stopped wanting it so badly. When I saw what Clayton and Rebecca were going through all those weeks, I realized that we were lucky to have each other and needed nothing else. I stopped craving the baby and then it happened.”

Jonathan agreed with her, but, an analytical man by nature, he was not entirely convinced. *God help us if there are creatures and tigers to come*, he thought as he fell asleep.

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## Chapter 23

Rebecca was fast asleep when they got to her parents' home. Clayton kissed her cheek to wake her up and she protested. "No, Clayton it is too early. Let me sleep."

She tried to turn over and then realized she was not in bed. She opened her eyes and was surprised how dark it was.

"Princess, we are at your parents' house. Come sleepy-head."

"Oh, oops, sorry. I must be really tired."

"Yes, you have been working too hard this week. Come, let's go. You need some fresh air."

He jumped out of the car and opened the door for her and she stumbled out, clutching her handbag.

"Go, greet your parents. I will bring the bags. Come on, wake up!" and gave a pat on her bottom.

"Okay, okay! I'm awake now, no need for violence."

"Such a grouch when you wake up."

She walked off into the house.

George was waiting at the door, happy to see his daughter after her ordeal some two weeks ago. He made her turn around while he inspected her and then gave her a huge hug. He held her so tightly, she complained.

"Dad! I am fine, truly. Hello, where is Mum?"

"Right here darling! Oh my baby, I am sooo pleased to see you!"

She grabbed her daughter from her husband.

*Back off, old man, my baby is here.*

*Your baby, what, you made her yourself? She looks so wonderful.*

*I know. That Clayton has made quite a difference. I can hardly believe they actually did it.*

*Yes, especially because they took so long to get anything right.*

"Clayton, my boy, it is good to see you in one piece."

George hugged Clayton as he came in.

"Yes, it is good to see you too."

Clayton was touched by the gesture. His own father had never hugged him. He felt like he had come home. It was a good feeling.

He hugged Rowena and they went inside.

They sat on the patio and ate a delightful meal prepared for them. Clayton was very content. Afterwards, he pulled Rebecca to him and made her lean on him. She was looking so tired.

“Do you want to go to bed, Princess?”

“Yes, no. I want to chat first. I haven’t seen them for a while.”

“Okay, do you want to be alone with them?”

“No, it is okay. Thank you for asking. Come let’s make some coffee. Those two are having one of their arguments.”

Clayton put the kettle on and chatted to her about work. He looked so comfortable here, *so at home*, she thought. *I can’t bear not to sleep in the same bed with him tonight. It is going to be awful.*

“I know,” he said. “I am probably going to spend the whole night pacing, thinking about you, sleeping all alone. I don’t think I can do it, Rebecca.”

“Stop reading my mind. Of course you can do it. I just can’t bear the thought of facing my parents tomorrow morning, if you and I sleep in the same bed. It seems wrong, especially since my father still thinks I am five.”

“I know, but it does not make it easier.”

“Make what easier?” George asked from the door.

“Nothing, Dad. That was private. Go back and have a silent fight with your wife.”

“Not a chance. I think I am already in too much trouble. I have to try and charm my way into our bed tonight.”

His eyes twinkled.

“Dad, please. I do not want to know about that, okay?”

“Alright Sweetpea. Stop being such a grouch. You are in a mood today. Just woke up?”

“Yes. I was having a wonderful sleep before this tiger woke me up.”

“She is such a complete pain in the morning, isn’t she? I don’t know how you put up with her, Clayton. She used to complain and moan until she got to school, *everyday*.

‘Daddy, I don’t want to wake up yet, I want to go back to bed and I want to be left alone’. She never grew out of it.”

“Dad, leave me alone. Stop telling Clayton all my secrets.”

“Oh, that was not a secret. Wait until we go to the hotel for drinks tomorrow afternoon. I will have him all to myself and boy, do I have stories to tell.”

Clayton was laughing at her horrified expression.

“This is going to be very interesting. I am so looking forward to it.”

She glared at both of them, which made them laugh even more.

“Go away, both of you. I will make the coffee. Go and charm Mum, if you dare.”

They left her in the kitchen, laughing at her. *Men! Clayton is just like my father. Over-protective, but feeling entitled to taunt me themselves.*

When she brought the coffee, her mother was sitting close to Clayton, whispering something and laughing. Her father was standing on the balcony, pretending not to listen.

“Thank you dear,” her mother said.

Rebecca took two cups of coffee and went to the balcony to her father.

“Dad, I want to thank you for everything. You have been so patient when I have been so stubborn lately. Thank you.”

“Sweetpea, you have been a little stubborn, but mostly you have been brave. You know, your mother and I were saying how you never complained during this difficult time. You simply got on with the job. We are proud of you, Sweetpea.”

“Dad, is there anything wrong between you and Mum?”

“No, just the usual stuff. I want to assist in an interesting trial, running in a few weeks’ time. She does not want me to. She thinks I need to relax and stop worrying about others. It is the same argument we have had for a few years now. Eventually, she will agree, but I have to climb this mountain first. You know how she fusses. We are alright, really.”

“You both look a bit strained, so I wondered if there was something else.”

“No, I guess we were stressed about you and then we spent the next week feeling guilty, worried and relieved that things turned out all right. We spent one whole week talking about nothing else, wanting to phone you every day. We wanted to be sure it was gone. We phoned one night and Clayton said you had gone to bed. He told us that you were tired a lot and needed to sleep. Are you alright now?”

“Yes, Dad, for about six or seven days, my body simply couldn’t stay awake for long. Clayton was wonderful. He cooked for me and has basically been spoiling me. He was also tired and while I slept, he stayed awake, because he couldn’t really sleep on his back. But, we are fine now.”

“Dad, after you did it, how did you feel, about Mum?”

He was silent for a while.

“At first I was so relieved she was alive, I didn’t really think about it. Then, I started to realize how lucky we were to have each other. I know we fight a lot, but Sweetpea, every day I wake up and think how lucky I was to have met her that day. I loved her then and always will. Why do you ask?”

“Did you ever feel, well, obligated or burdened by having to be her Protector?”

“Never, Sweetpea. I felt quite privileged to be the one who was so special to her. I guess, a man likes to know he can take care of business, no matter how liberated he is. I liked the fact that she needed me, you know?”

“Even when you were in pain?”

“Especially when I was in all that pain. I felt I had done something wonderful for that beautiful elusive woman, who kept so much of herself away from me. Rebecca, Clayton will not feel obligated or burdened. You see, if he did not love you, or need to protect you, one or both of you would have been dead now. Sweetpea, he needs to protect you. Okay?”

“Okay, but it just seems so unfair Dad. You know, he takes his role very seriously. He does not even realize he is doing it. If we walk in the street and somebody is about to bump into me, he gets me out of the way. When we are with other people, he talks to them, but still keeps an eye on me. I don’t know. It seems like a burden.”

“But how do you feel about it?”

“I like knowing that he is around. I sleep better at night and I have finally been convinced that it has gone. Yes, I like it, but sometimes he is a bit possessive and we fight, but I like it, overall.”

“So why are you bothered about it?”

“It just seems he did not have a choice in the matter.”

“Did you, Sweetpea?”

“Okay, I get your point.”

“Rebecca, why haven’t you discussed this with him?”

“Because he gets angry when I say these things. He thinks it is because I don’t trust him. So, we go round in circles about it.”

“With time, Rebecca, you will accept things as they are. You want your fantasy of a normal relationship, like everybody else. But you should know that everybody else has their own problems and doubts. These are not different, you know. You do have a normal relationship.”

“You sound just like Clayton. He says that all the time. But you are right. I don’t know what I am talking about.”

“Rebecca, Clayton is a good boy. But I must tell you, being a Protector is not something objective, out there that he does as a job. It is a way of life where he shows you he loves you. You must not forget that, Sweetpea. You seem to think he is working for you. Well, he is not. He is simply showing you how much he loves you and you must show the same love. Otherwise, he will feel rejected and hurt. Remember that he has needs too.”

She hugged her father.

“Thank you, Dad, I needed to hear that. You are right. Okay, let us go join those whispering two there.”

“Okay, you two, what is all this whispering about?”

“No, Princess, nothing. Come join us.”

Rowena had a sparkle in her eye.

“George, are you ready to apologize to me?”

“Yes, my love, but certainly not in front of the children.”

“Oh Dad!”

“We’ll see you children in the morning. Rebecca, thank you so much for coming and for bringing your charming young man. Goodnight.”

Rowena breezed out of the room.

“Well, kids, that’s my cue. Sleep tight.”

Clayton was laughing, because Rebecca was so embarrassed.

“I don’t think they are embarrassed about these things Rebecca. *You* need to realize that you are not their five-year old daughter anymore.”

“What were you two whispering so deliciously about?”

“Oh nothing, this and that.” He smiled knowingly.

“Oh, you are so impossible sometimes. Shall we go to bed?”

“Okay, but *we* are not going to bed, are we? You are sleeping away from me.”

He sounded really upset.

“Clayton, stop it. It is just for two days.”

“Two whole nights. That’s too painful to think about. Distract me, please Princess.”

“Okay, once upon a time, there were three bears...”

He tickled her.

Rebecca woke to the sound of Clayton coming into her room. It seemed ridiculously early.

“Good morning, Clayton, is that coffee I smell?”

“Yes, but I want my reward before you get the coffee, deal?”

“Deal, come here.”

She kissed him on his cheek and laughed.

“Very brave, aren’t you?”

“Yes, my parents are downstairs, remember?” she said smugly.

Clayton sat next to her on the bed.

“Now, I am giving you one last chance .Give me a proper reward, or you will pay double.”

“Okay”, and pecked him on the cheek again.

He turned his face to her and kissed her. Gently and then suddenly, he was kissing her, demanding all of her. He was taking control, very quickly. He pushed her back onto the pillows and caressed her breast.

“Clayton, behave, okay? My parents are.....”

“Not, here, my dear. They left a few minutes ago.”

“Oops, I walked into that one, didn’t I?”

“Hmm, shhh. I want my full, double reward now. Shhh.”

He lifted the t-shirt she was wearing and gently stroked her body.

“Oh Clayton.....”

“Hmmm, give me some of that life force, that balance you always talk about...”

“Okay, but Clayton?”

“Hmm?”

“You know, it is far more auspicious if the dragon is above the tiger. Did you know?”

He laughed at her.

“Okay, dragon, have you way with me,” as he rolled onto his back.

Much later, he thought, *yes that was highly auspicious.*

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## Chapter 24

Clayton spent a pleasant afternoon at the Hilton Hotel pub with George. They spoke like old friends and Clayton felt comfortable to tell him all his thoughts and his concerns about Rebecca. He did not hesitate and George enjoyed the boy’s openness with him.

“What really frustrates me is that she worries about some things and won’t talk to me about it. I wish she could trust me enough.”

“It is not you she does not trust. It is herself. Rebecca has spent her whole life being rejected without good reason. She does not know how to be accepted. You need to teach her that, show her that. The secret is not to get angry with her. I told you, charm her and she will respond quickly. Clayton, you must understand that since she was fourteen years old, she was *fighting* to survive, fighting for ways to deal with rejection. She has no idea how to love. You must teach her how to love you.”

“How? Sometimes I can see what she is thinking, but she shuts me out. I wish she could see what I’m thinking.”

“She does not know what you are thinking?”

“No.”

“Clayton, did she *tell* you that she can’t do it?”

“No, we never really discussed it. She simply tells me to get out of her mind. She never said anything, so I assume she..... Oh, I see what you mean. Yes, she definitely knows what I am thinking. I was just presumptuous to assume that she didn’t.”

“Yes, that is exactly what her mother did to me. She made me believe she could not do it, and wham, when I was really angry one day, she said ‘don’t you dare even think about that. You will never get into my bed tonight.’”

Clayton was laughing.

“You see, sometimes when we fight, it makes me, well, want her more, and it drives her insane. After that, I tortured her for days with calculated, deliberate thoughts about what I wanted to do to her. She was completely horrified and she finally confessed. They know from the day you bring the light. That is one of the consequences, if you can call it that. Because you are together, as one in that time, you have opened up the ‘lines of communication’. She has not told you, Clayton, because they think they can control us that way.”

“That wench. Now I see how, when we are arguing, she has managed to second-guess me. That wench. Oh, I am definitely going to make her pay for that. What do you think I should do?”

They were laughing about this when Clayton suddenly said, “excuse me a second.”

He phoned her on her cell phone.

“Princess, what’s wrong?”

“Clayton, nothing. Why?”

“Your heart is beating fast. You got a fright, what, Princess?”

“Oh Clayton, relax. I am with my mother, whose is a very competent witch. I just saw a snake in the garden and got a fright. One of my mother’s new friends was here. I don’t like them, so I got a fright. She has sent if off. Are you okay? Having fun?”

“Yes, very much so. Okay, see you later.”

“What do you want for dinner?”

He was quiet for a while.

“No, Clayton, I mean to eat, that will be cooked. Honestly!”

He laughed, “anything will be fine.”

“Mother says ask the old man what he wants to eat for dinner, cooked, okay?”

“Okay. He says tell that old crone that he wants red meat.”

“Okay, see you later.”

“Yes, she definitely knows. I just tried it. Oh, she is in such trouble.”

“She is very much like her mother, even though she looks like me. They keep everything to themselves, until you beg or fight to get it out of them. They are exactly the same that way. I know. I lived with both of them. I would come home from work and they would be silent. Of course, something is wrong, but will anyone say anything? No, they would just look out the window, eat quietly and hide behind a book or the television. It would drive me nuts. Once, Rebecca’s cat died and it took me three hours to hear this. Three hours! They conspire in their silence. All Rowena had to say was, ‘the cat died, Rebecca is upset’. No, that was too easy. They had to torture me with their silence first. It drives me mad just thinking about it.”

“I know I get that treatment all the time. Rebecca has a patient she was worried about. Suddenly, the family disappears and she does not know what to do. She gave me the silent treatment. I was so annoyed with her. By the time she told me this I was so angry with her, I was unsympathetic. Now, when she even starts that look, I say ‘we are not going to do anything before you tell me what is wrong’. She fights and calls me difficult, arrogant and pushy, but it saves me a night of trying to guess the possibilities. That is the thing we most fight about, her silence.”

George laughed. “Yes, that is a good plan. Talking about plans, Clayton, have you thought about the future?”

“Yes, I guess, I don’t know. I suppose I am hoping things will stay the same. Why?”

“She might just fall pregnant. How do you feel about that?”

“I don’t know. I suppose we have accepted that we can’t have children. We don’t want our child to go through all this.”

“But it might happen anyway?”

“Yes, I guess. I suppose we haven’t really talked about it. Rebecca will not have a child, I can tell you that. I look at her, with her patients, and think what a wonderful mother she would be, but it also makes me sad.”

“Yes, we need to find a way to break the spell, so you can *choose* whether you want children.”

“Rebecca does not want to do anything right now. She is worried something might go wrong, and she desperately wants to be a ‘normal’ couple. Even if I mention it, she shuts off. She thinks it makes her a freak. She is not ready to do anything right now.”

“What else happened that night, Clayton?”

“What do you mean?”

“Rebecca is not telling us everything. We know there was more. She needed too much sleep. What was she recovering from?”

Clayton was quiet for a long time. Should he tell her father? Rebecca would be furious, but, on the other hand, they might be able to help her.

“George, she died, just for a few seconds.”

The old man was so shocked, he said nothing.

“Oh George, it was too awful. I saw her, leaving, then suddenly she was back. I don’t think I am ready to risk that again. That is why we have been so... well, non-committal about it.”

“Oh my! She died, my baby died. She did not even tell us.”

“Well, that is one of the things she is being silent about. She brushes it off, denying it. She has never admitted it to me, but I was there, begging her to come back. She won’t talk about it, at all. When she came round, she had tears in her eyes. George, whatever happened, it caused her a lot of pain and she is frightened right now. I was hoping she would talk to you about it. She certainly does not want to tell me. She feels as if I am carrying some burden and does not want to make it worse.”

“Oh my Sweetpea. That explains why she asked me all those questions yesterday. Questions about how you must feel, whether I ever felt burdened. We talked about that last night. I don’t know. I must talk to her about it. Clayton, Rebecca does not know how to love us. We must all teach her that part of love is worrying about her. She thinks she must go it alone. Tonight, we will openly discuss the matter.”

~ ~ ~ ~

Rebecca was smiling at her mother.

“I love it when he does that, phones me and asks me what’s wrong.”

“Yes, it makes you feel special, doesn’t it? It is a great reward for all that trouble we have to go through before we find them. It really is worth it, don’t you think?”

“I don’t know, Mum, I would have preferred a normal relationship with a normal boy. No tigers, no butterflies, no nothing. Just good, old-fashioned stuff.”

“I know Rebecca, you always thought like that. But imagine, my dear, how boring it would be. The great sex.”

“Mother!”

“Oh Rebecca, don’t be such a baby. Admit it, the sex is wonderful. He gets into your heart, mind and soul. It is glorious stuff.”

“Okay, it is pretty amazing and he can’t seem to get enough of it. I tell you, he thinks about it all the time.”

“Yes, I think it comes from all the Protector stuff. It makes them feel like they are in control and they love it. Whenever George protects me from something, he goes mad for it. Don’t be silly, Rebecca. We are your parents, but we are also people. You are an adult now. We can talk about this, surely.”

“I know Mum. Clayton says I want to believe I am still five. He says I am too silly about these things with you.”

“And he is right. We are special, Rebecca, the four of us, and we should talk about these things. It is so nice to talk to someone who actually understands what happens to you. Otherwise, it sounds so far-fetched.”

“Yes, okay, I will try to relax. Sorry for being such a baby.”

“Does Clayton try to do it in your mind, when you are in public?”

“Yes, all the time. I just shut him off.”

“Why, darling? It is truly amazing. At some dull dinner party, try it. Seduce his mind and see how he will enjoy that. He will spend weeks doing whatever you say. They feel like they got something no other man can do, which is true, of course. It makes them the winner in the male competition for sex. Do it, Rebecca, you will enjoy it so much. Plus, you can do anything to him and no sore muscles the next day.”

“Oh Mum, that is the craziest thing I have ever heard. With my mind? Hmm, I think I will save it for one of those days when we are fighting. Anyway, he does not know that I get in there.”

“What? My dear, he will soon find out. Best you tell him otherwise he will torture you for weeks with bad thoughts, until you confess. Your father did that to me. Beat Clayton to it. Confess, sweetly, before he catches you out.”

“Okay, I think I am getting careless already. I will confess, sweetly.”

“Rebecca, we need to talk about the unbinding spell. You seemed unhappy about it. Tell me.”

“Okay, firstly, I found it all so hard Mum and felt lost and confused. I had all the painful memories coming back to me and I am trying to work through them. I need to do that first. Secondly, I am not sure that it will help. Clayton does not want to have children, so it does not matter. The risk is high, when we won’t have children anyway.”

“Rebecca, have you gone mad? Do you think your father and I *chose* to bring you into this world, knowing what you would go through?”

“I know, Mum, but I am hoping that it won’t happen twice....”

“Rebecca, listen to me. It is not your choice. As long as the spell is there, you will have a child. At least, if we remove it, you and Clayton can choose whether or not to have a child. That is the only choice you have. Do you understand?”

“I know, Mum, but I can’t seem to talk to Clayton about it. I don’t know what to say...”

“Tell him everything we discussed now. It must be worrying him too. If he does not want children, then he is in for a rude shock when he suddenly finds himself with a child, cursed by The Darkness.”

Those words branded themselves in Rebecca’s mind the whole afternoon. How could she tell them what had happened? What would she say? What if happened again? She tried to calm her nerves and phoned Jackie.

“How are you, J?”

“Hello Rebecca, I am fine. Jono is driving me a little crazy, treating me like I am ill.”

“How sweet.”

“No it is not. He refused to let me go and do the shopping with him today. I was to stay at home and put up my feet. Gosh, does he think I am going to stay indoors for nine months? He wakes up in the night to see if I am alright.”

“Oh Jackie. Give him a break. I mean, the man has waited so long. Anyway, he will get the hang of it soon enough.”

“I don’t think so. He is worried that we will become like you and Clayton. He keeps saying he wants to be sure that there are no creatures. I was very bad the other night. He

woke me up to ask me if I was alright. I was so angry that I told him that I thought he was my Protector. He completely freaked out. He was so angry when I started laughing. You should have seen his face, shocked horror, that his precious back might be beaten. It was too funny.”

“You are so wicked. That is the most frightening thing for him. Oh, how could you?”

“I will do it again if he doesn’t back off. How is Clayton?”

“Fine. Out bonding with my father. They have been gone for hours. I don’t even want to think about what they are talking about. But it is lovely out here. I feel very relaxed.”

“Good, you needed that. How is your Mum?”

“Very well, she is out in the garden, talking to her plants. Tell Jono that.”

They laughed and Jackie said, “yes, when you get back, we will have dinner, so we can torture him together. It will be great fun. Call me again, please, so I will feel sane.”

Rebecca went to the garden to join her mother.

“Mum, shall we cook? It is getting late.”

“Yes, sure, start. I will join you in a minute.”

Rebecca went into the kitchen and watched her mother through the window. Will she cope as well as her mother did? The way she accepted her life, without too much anxiety?

While her mother helped her in the kitchen, they gossiped about Rowena’s witch friends. They laughed about spells they had tried that had gone wrong.

“Mum, I crossed over.”

Rebecca said it, the simple statement she had tried so hard to deny.

“What, darling, what do you mean?”

“That night, I crossed over and could not find my way back. That is why I do not want to do it again.”

“Rebecca, Rebecca, what are you saying? That you died?”

“Yes, Mum. Yes. I have not been able to say that, to myself and to Clayton.”

“Rebecca, baby, why did you not tell us?”

She went over and held her child. *She had died? Oh my word, it had been much worse than she had imagined. The poor thing. How could this happen to my child?*

“Oh, my baby.”

They stood there, in the kitchen, holding each together and crying. When Rebecca eventually told her mother everything, she felt so much better. Her mother, however, felt a lot worse. She had never anticipated that her daughter would go through so much.

When Clayton got into the car with George, he was concerned. Was he wrong to have told her father? He seemed so lost now, so far away.

“George, I am sorry I told you about this. I just think you need to understand what she has been through.”

“Clayton, my boy, there is no need to be sorry. I am glad you told me. We would have just pushed her into doing more, when she was not ready. That would be far more dangerous.”

“George, I don’t want to deal with this today. I want her to be ready to talk about it, to share with me or you. I can’t even imagine how she will feel when she realizes what happened to her. You know, when she was up there, she was just smiling. There was no fear, no anxiety, but her body was crying. I don’t want to push her right now. Please, can we do it some other time?”

“Yes, I don’t think I am ready to talk about it too. Let us leave it alone. Anyway, her mother needs to know and she will not deal well with it. She has spent years feeling guilty and helpless and this has been her greatest fear. Anyway, I am too drunk now. I need time to find a way that this will be okay.”

“Yes and I will get through to Rebecca. Thank you for listening. I have never really been able to say it, out loud before. It just clung in my mind all this time. Now that I have said it, I think I can speak to Rebecca too. Let’s leave it for now.”

When they got to the house, they were greeted by the beautiful aroma of food and Clayton, always hungry, was ready to eat. They ate quietly, hardly speaking.

*You know, don’t you?*

*Yes, she told me this afternoon.*

*God, Rowena, how can she sit so calmly there, as if nothing happened?*

*Because she is still too scared. She needs time. Clayton told you?*

*Yes, he is devastated.*

*I can see. What shall we do?*

*Nothing, my dear, nothing. Clayton says he wants to deal with it, his way*

*Okay, but .....*

“Can you two please stop that? You have guests, Mum.”

“What, darling?”

“Mum, please. Give it a rest.”

“Rebecca tells me you went to see Nana’s house today. How was it?”

Clayton tried to distract her, because he could tell Rebecca was getting agitated.

“I still feel odd about seeing other people there. There are three kids who play outside all the time. They moved in about six months ago. The woman, Chloe, seems to like the house and the garden looks great. My mother would have been proud.”

“Yes, I liked seeing the kids there. That is the way Nana always liked it. Tons of kids running around there, making a noise. I would come back from school to visit her and there would be kids entertaining her. I would get so jealous sometimes. My special Nana, and all those strangers.”

After dinner, George and his wife went off to bed early. Rebecca thought, *she is going to tell him now. I hope he does not make a scene and get all fatherly possessive.* But neither George nor his wife emerged from their bedroom.

“Clayton, you look a little tired. Are you okay?”

“Yes, a little drunk, I think. I need to go to bed, all alone....”

“Oh stop that, we are leaving tomorrow, so it is only one night.”

“Come, let me tuck you in, okay?”

“Okay, but do you promise to behave, Clayton?”

“I guess I have to.....”

She fell off to sleep, with Clayton rubbing her back with his right hand. However, she woke up in the middle of the night, unable to sleep. The mood around the house had been different, a bit sad, and she knew that Clayton was trying to help her. *I miss him. I can't sleep without him tonight.* She went into his bedroom and he was asleep. She climbed into the bed and curled up against him. He woke up and held her.

“What are you doing here?”

“Hmm, looking for some company. I thought you might enjoy the surprise.”

“Yes, nice. Are you trying to charm me?”

“Yes, no. I could not sleep.”

“Why do you need to charm me? Have you been corrupt?”

“Yes, I have been. I have been difficult these last few weeks. I'm sorry.”

“Relax, it's been okay.” He hugged her closer, “But you must sleep now or I won't behave, okay?”

“Okay, okay...”

Clayton was fast asleep again. *He must be really tired, she thought, because I am the one who usually falls off to sleep first.*

But Clayton was not asleep. He did not want to talk to her now because he knew himself well enough to know that he would have insisted that they talk about her experience and they would fight. *Not now, I can't fight now*, he thought.

In the morning Clayton had packed his things and was sitting in the garden with her father when she finally woke up. She realized that they were talking about her because they suddenly kept quiet when they saw her making her way to the garden.

"Good morning. What are you are up to so early in the morning?"

"Good morning, Sweetpea. In case you haven't noticed, it is ten already. We've had breakfast and your mother has gone over to see one of her friends. Go, get some breakfast and join us."

"Oh, I didn't realize it is so late already." She went into the kitchen and Clayton followed her.

"Good morning, Princess," and he held her.

"Now, go and sit with your father, I'll get you something."

"I like this, you serving me."

"That's alright because you will definitely serve me later when we get home."

His blue eyes were shining.

When he brought the breakfast, Rebecca was laughing with her father. Clayton looked at her and clearly visualized himself ripping her blouse off.

She got a shock and jumped up, clutching her blouse.

"What is the matter, Princess?"

"Oh, ur.. Nothing...."

Clayton and the George looked at each other and smiled. *Good, let her suffer*. His mind games were just beginning.

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## Chapter 25

While they driving back, Clayton was quiet. He had learnt to shut her off and he was doing so very nicely. He wanted them to get home, sit down and finally talk. He was not prepared to let these silences stand between them. Anyway, she seemed a bit nervous about something. *She wants to say something, but does not know how to*.

“Clayton, I have a confession to make.”

“Really, what have you done?”

“Well, it is not something I have done exactly. It is what I haven’t done.”

His phone was ringing. *Shit*, she thought, *not now*.

It was Jonathan, bemoaning his wife’s unreasonable carelessness about their baby.

“She wants to go to the attic in that old house they are decorating, to ‘see for herself’ what the place needs. I mean, that is why she employs all those people to do those things. Why can’t she send someone up there?”

“Jono, these women are really full of nonsense. *Tell* her that she is not to climb those stairs. I have been in that house. It is awful. It looks like it is going to fall apart any day. Jono, take control. That is much your baby as it is hers. Nonsense. Put her on the phone.”

Rebecca was staring at him. *Has he gone mad? Who would ever tell Jackie what to do? He was as bad as Jonathan. Was Jackie to stay in bed for nine months?*

“Jackie, what’s this nonsense that you are going inside the death trap attic?”

“Hello Clayton. I’m fine thank you. I am going to have a look at the design, because I have some ideas. What’s the big deal?”

“The big deal, my dear, is that your husband will never forgive himself if anything happened to you. Be reasonable, Jackie, that place is awful. Send someone else, okay?”

“No, Clayton, I can’t stop living now. I am only a few weeks pregnant. What do you expect me to do? Stay at home for nine months? I want the baby as much as he does, you know that. But I am not ill or anything.”

“Jackie, listen to me. This is not the time to assert yourself with him. Look, try to see his perspective. He can’t do anything to help, so he watches from a distance.”

“What do you want me to do? You guys are crazy.”

“Okay, calm down. Listen, how about this. Let someone else deal with the attic and you get the rest of the house. Or, Jono is right, they can tell you what is up there and you can work on it *from the ground*. Think about how helpless he feels right now. If you fight him, he will just get worse and then you *will* spend the next nine months in the house. Just show him you understand his fear and he will be okay.”

“But Clay, he won’t let me do anything.”

“Yes, because you have not shown him that you are willing to accept his help and concern. Make a concession so that he knows you are being responsible. You know he will back off. Come on, J, give the man a break.”

“Okay, you sound just like Rebecca. Fine. I won’t go into the attic but I will go shopping and everything else.”

“That’s my girl. Just show consideration for him. This is not easy for him. I’ll get him to back off on the other stuff, okay?”

“Okay, thanks. How was your visit?”

“Very good. We are almost back home now. It was wonderful and relaxing. Rebecca says hello and she will call you later, privately. Put your husband on the phone.”

“Jono, listen, she had agreed not to go in the attic but you have to forget the rules about her other movements. You stopped her from going shopping?”

“Yes, she walks around for hours, no rest, and no food.”

“Jono, I don’t think that is going to work. Perhaps it might be best if you went shopping, but stopped off for lunch, rest and the like. If you push her, you know she will just get impossible.”

“I know. She has been a complete witch to me. She keeps fighting about how I am treating her like a child. I have to. I want her to relax and enjoy it. We waited so long.”

“Yes, but nine months is a long time for her. If she is not entertained, then she will get hectic with you. It is also new to her, you know.”

“Okay, thanks. Say hello to Rebecca for me.”

Clayton smiled when he stopped talking.

“You women, you always try a man’s patience.”

“What did I do? Anyway, what is this *tell* her what to do?”

“Sometimes a man has got to take control and stop the nonsense.”

“What? Take control? Of what, the women?”

“Yes, Princess. Otherwise you get away with murder. Now, that confession, let’s hear it.”

“Maybe later. You are in that ‘I am the boss mood’.”

“Playing for time again? Knowing how much I hate it? That will certainly help you.”

He looked at her, his mind on her blouse and he did it again. He ripped it off with his mind. She glared back at him, shocked and he looked out the window.

“I don’t want to talk about it.”

“We’ll see about that,” and this time his mind ripped off her jeans.

He watched her touch her belly and wanted to laugh. He looked out the window again.

“Your parents are great. It is so interesting to visit them.”

“Interesting?”

“The way they talk to each other.”

“Yes, nice. Clayton I am going to sleep now.”

“Why? We are almost at your house. Trying to run away again?”

“Clayton, stop it. I don’t want to talk to you. Go away and stop trying to get into my head.”

He laughed and said nothing.

When they had taken out their bags, Clayton complained that he was starving.

“Okay, what do you want to eat?”

He looked at her and ripped off her jeans again. She was startled.

“I think I want a sandwich. Are you okay? You seem a bit jumpy.”

“I am fine. One sandwich coming up.”

She dashed off into the kitchen. *Shit, he knows and he is going to do this until I confess. Damn, I should have told him that night when he was half-asleep.*

When Clayton bit his sandwich, he visualised biting into her thigh. She touched her thigh, rubbing it and he almost wanted to stop his game, because she was getting anxious. But, she just glared at him and it spurred him on. With each bite, his mind bit into another part of her. She got up and walked away. *Confess sweetly, remember?*

She came back in and said,

“Clayton, I am feeling a little tired. Do you want to go to bed?”

“Hmm, is that an offer?”

“Yes, I missed you this weekend.”

She was smiling at him and she went and sat on his lap.

“Are you charming me?”

“Yes, do you object?”

“No, not really. What do you want Rebecca?”

He said softly but his mind went for a large chunk of her breast. She jumped off him.

“Okay, you win. I have had enough. I can’t bear it. Stop it, Clayton, it is quite scary.”

“What, Princess?” His eyes were smiling. *Got you.*

“Okay, I have always been able to see into your mind. From that day, okay? I just didn’t tell you. So there, I have said it, are you happy now?”

“No, I was just beginning to enjoy myself. You confessed too soon. I am not happy. I had quite a few things planned for you.”

“Clayton, please, stop it. I should have told you, but I didn’t. I know.”

“Okay, but the next time you don’t tell me something important, it will be much worse. Deal?”

“Deal.”

“Now, about that offer.....”

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Clayton was sleeping, dreaming of Double J and their fighting about Jackie’s movements when Rebecca woke him up.

“Clayton, please wake up.”

“No, I am tired. Really, woman, don’t you get enough?”

“I need to tell you something. Please, it’s important.”

“Hmm it better be. Another confession?”

He was sitting up now and watching her.

“Yes, Clayton. Before you fight about this, I want to tell you that I never told you before because I did not really want to deal with it. So, please, don’t start giving me a hard time, okay?”

“Rebecca, no stalling, no games, just say it...”

“I died that day on the mountain.”

Clayton was so shocked he said nothing. He had expected she would do her usual stalling and trying to find a long-winded way to tell him.

“Yes, I know. Princess. Tell me about it.”

He pulled her close to him and she told him, how she felt and all the fears and doubts that went through her at the time. She had tears in her eyes and Clayton said nothing. What could he say?

Then she said, “Clayton, how did you know?”

“Because your body was lying in the car and you were floating above me. It was too awful. I can’t even tell you how I got the strength to get up and go to you. I called to you, but you just smiled at me. Why did you smile?”

“I was thinking, Clayton, please answer the phone, it will just ring again. You seemed to think you were in your bedroom, the way you fumble around the table in your sleep, trying to find the phone.”

“Clayton, when I saw my body lying there, I got such a fright, that I became confused. That was the scary part. I tried to fight my way back the dark passages, back to you, but it so dark. If the butterfly was not there, I would not have found you.”

“Yes, Princess. It saved us. You know, it flapped all over your body, trying to tell me to give you energy. Eventually I understood. Rebecca, whatever happens between us, we are bound together by that moment. I know that I am over-protective sometimes, but I saw you, floating above me. I don’t ever want to see that again.”

“Clayton, are you angry with me, for not telling you?”

“Yes, a little. But I guess I was so upset myself that I tried not to deal with it. Also, I told your father.”

“You what?”

“Yes.”

“What did he say?”

“Not much. He just felt the way I do, guess. That feeling of loss, of wanting to protect you. That’s why we took so long. We talked about it a lot.”

“But he said nothing to me.”

“We thought it best to let you deal with it when you were ready. Your father understands you better than you know, Rebecca. He knew you would talk on your own terms, even if it is in the early hours of the morning.”

“Sorry, I just couldn’t keep it in anymore. Sorry.”

“Hmm, come, it’s already day time. Let’s go have coffee and get ready for the day. Oh, Princess, if there are other confessions, can you make them, say, between 6 and 10 in the evening?”

She laughed. “Well, I’ll try.....”

She kissed him and went to make the coffee. Clayton stayed in bed, thinking how she always surprised him and how he would *never* understand the only woman whose mind he could read.

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## Chapter 26

Jackie and Jonathan were arguing about the baby’s possible names. Jonathan was furious, because since she had been pregnant, she had taken on an air of superiority he did

not appreciate. This was not how he dreamed it would be. He had visions of his beautiful wife, serene and peaceful and most importantly, *acquiescent*. She was four months pregnant and already she was starting to talk about *her* baby. She had been moody and ill and had taken his head off over anything he did that was not to her liking. She was a complete nightmare, because when he tried to fight back, she would just cry. He felt helpless and totally emasculated. He realized that he had little say in matters around the house, especially with issues about the baby. He could control nothing, not his house, or his baby growing beautifully in her belly. What infuriated him the most was that she looked so beautiful, so wholesome. He wondered if this was one of the phases, as had been her morning sickness when she had shouted and screamed and told him to shut up, because he did not know what it felt like. Now, she was glaring at him, saying,

“Jono, what kind of name is Timothy? Are you mad?”

Jonathan walked outside. He needed to breathe. What could he do?

“Don’t walk away from me Jono, not when we are talking.”

Jono snapped.

“Talking? Who’s talking? *Darling*, from where I see it, I am making suggestions and you are insulting me. You are rude and obnoxious and I don’t have to take it, okay? I’ve had enough. Choose whatever name *you* want for *your* baby. Then send me a note informing of your decision, okay? Save me the insults. Now, please, woman, leave me in peace.”

“Jono?” her voice had softened.

“Please J, leave me in peace.”

“Jono, I am sorry. I don’t know what came over me. I am sorry, okay?”

“No, J, it is not okay. I want my wife back. I don’t want some screaming woman. If you have a problem, let’s talk about it. I don’t know what you want from me when you scream insults at me. Now, please leave me alone for a while. I need to cool off.”

She went back inside, walking in that dejected way she did when she wanted him to feel bad. Well this time he wouldn’t. He turned his back on her and breathed the fresh air. *I don’t know how I am going to survive five more months of this.* He could hear her crying and it took all his resolve not to go to her and comfort her. He knew that once he had done that, tomorrow would bring fresh insults and he could not do it. He went inside and fetched his cell phone and spent the next hour talking to Clayton, telling him his trials and tribulations. Clayton, as usual, teased him and as much as it had annoyed him in the past,

it comforted him. He liked the fact that there was still someone out there who made him laugh, even if it was at himself.

When he got back inside, his wife was curled up like a baby in their bed, fast asleep. He was a relieved man.

Clayton took Jackie to lunch the next day. *These women, why don't they just say what is wrong? Why make it difficult?* She looked her normal chirpy self and she was filling out nicely. She looked a lot better than he had seen her in the last few years.

"Okay, J, no nonsense, no lies, what is going on?"

"Oh Clay, nothing really. I just get so tense. I worry about the baby. What if something goes wrong? I worry so much and then I see *him* sitting there, looking so happy and it irritates me. It is all on my head. We have waited so long and it is all on my head. If anything goes wrong, then he will blame me, so I fight to get it out. Also, I am feeling a little scared. If all is well, can we take care of a child? Can we do that? We have spent all our lives partying and having fun. We don't know anything about babies. What will happen, Clay?"

"Jackie, you are impossible. First you complain that he is too involved and then you complain that he is leaving everything to you. What do you want Jackie? What do you want him to do?"

"I want him to stop being so bloody logical. I want him to talk to me, tell me he also has fears and anxieties. He just takes this as one of his cases, with a few obstacles along the way. I want him to care, okay? Not just about the baby, but also what happens afterwards. Do you understand?"

"No, I don't actually. He cares. I know he does. He is also very happy, yes, but that is because he thought this is what you wanted. I don't understand. I think you should tell him this, I know it would make it easier. Right now, he looks like shit, and he is not enjoying this. The only thing that keeps him going is that he loves you."

"Do you think he still loves me?"

"Oh Jackie, yes! Do you think any man would put up with all that abuse without a reason? Most men run off and find another woman to heal them. Not Jono, he says, 'what does she want from me?' He wants to be there for you but you have tried to keep him out. Talk to him, please. He needs your love right now."

“I suppose you are right. I have been awful to him. He wanted to go out the other night and I basically tore him to shreds. It was mean and horrible. Okay, you are right. I will make it up to him, starting today.”

“One more thing. Stop that nonsense that it is *your* baby. That really hurts him. Anyway, the last time I checked, it was both the man and the woman who made a baby. Have things changed since then Jackie?”

She laughed, “okay, point taken. Will not say my baby, will not scream, and will not launch insults.”

“Yes and you will?”

“I will be a loving wife, will talk about fears. Will talk, talk, talk, will cook good dinner tonight and wear sexy negligee, will...”

“Okay, I get the picture. Come give me a hug.”

Just then Zane and John walked into The Craft Centre. They saw her hugging him and heard him whispering something that made her laugh.

“You see, I told you. It must be his child, since she and Jono can’t have any. I told you,” Zane said with glee, his face flush with satisfaction.

John just smiled. All he saw were two friends having a hug. In his mind that was perfectly normal.

“Come, let’s go and say hello. Oops they have seen us.”

“Zane, darling, John, hello. Come and join us. Please, sit.”

Zane was too thrilled at the opportunity but John really preferred that they were alone, especially because they had both been working and had not seen each other much the last week.

“Hello, you two. Lovely to see you. Gosh, Jackie, you look fabulous. Pregnancy agrees with you. How is dear Jono?”

“He is in good health.”

“Clayton, how are you and that beauty of yours?”

“Hi Zane. We are fine. Thanks. And you, everything okay?”

“Yes, yes, just working too hard. We don’t seem to have enough time to party anymore. We need a good party.”

“Yes, that is a brilliant idea. Oh Clay, let’s have a party. I *need* a good party. What do you say? Just between friends?”

Zane thought, *what does ‘just between friends’ mean to these people?*

Clayton answered it for him.

“Yes, I like that idea. Rebecca has been talking about it too and I think that is what exactly what both you women need. A good party. Jono and I will arrange it. Deal?”

“Yes, thank you Clay. Zane, are you game?”

*What did she mean? No woman, I am not your kind of meat.*

“Yes, I think that would be nice,” said John, because he could see that Zane was entertaining lewd thoughts. “I have a wonderful caterer, so call me if you need anything.”

Zane was furious. *What was wrong with John? Did he want to have these people phone him, ‘if they need anything’?*

“Thanks. I will do that. Now, I have to run. Jackie, remember about tonight, okay?”

“Okay, I promise I will be the best.”

Clayton got up and hugged her as he left.

Zane was totally enthralled. *Tonight? The best? How did this man do it? Have these women feeding his debauched lust?* John, however, saw nothing untoward about the conversation and promptly told Zane when they left.

~ ~ ~ ~

Jonathan was wearily getting through the day when the phone rang. He looked at the number and it was his wife. Should he just ignore it? He did not need a fight during the day, the nights were bad enough. *What’s the use? I will get into trouble for not answering the phone, so I might as well get it over with.*

“Hello.” He said flatly.

“Hello darling, having a good day?”

*What is this now?*

“It is fine, so far, and you?”

“Fine J. I just want to tell you that I am sorry for being such an awful fiend to you the last few months. I’m sorry, sorry, sorry....”

Jono said nothing, waiting for her to viciously stab him in the groin.

“Anyway, I phoned to ask what special meal you need for dinner tonight.”

“Jackie, really, that is not necessary. Just be civil to me, okay. I don’t need anything else.”

“Oh Jono, I will make it up to you. Tonight, you will see a reformed woman and you will be pleasantly surprised, okay?”

“Okay. Will see you later.”

He doubted very much that the night would be any better, so he went back to work.

When he got home, she was sitting quietly in front of the television. She looked so beautiful that he went to her and kissed her. *Bugger it if she swears me. I want to kiss my beautiful wife.* She stood up and kissed him back and held onto him.

“Jono, darling, hello.”

“Hello J. Had a good day?”

“Yes, I met Clayton for lunch and he very harshly told me how awful I have been to you and hearing him say it so fiercely, I felt really ashamed. I’m so sorry, Jono. I really am. I have made us a nice dinner and then, for desert, I am on the menu. Then if you don’t mind, we can talk.”

“Is this for real? What are you up to J? Any nasty shocks waiting for me?”

She laughed.

“No, my darling, only lovely ones later, I hope.”

She held his hand and led him to eat. He knew that things must be changing, because he had not heard that laugh in quite a while. *I hope so*, he thought, as she chatted about work.

“At any rate, things are going well with Rebecca and Clayton. They seemed to have settled in. Isn’t that nice?”

“Yes, considering what they went through, I am very pleased. I don’t think I have ever seen him so relaxed, so charming. He even smiles at the women in the office. Lorraine, his secretary, still thinks he must have a fever.”

They were laughing together and by the time they were ready for bed, they were like old friends again. Lying in bed, having talked for so long, Jonathan smiled.

“I must remember to thank Clayton. He has been a great friend through all this.”

~ ~ ~ ~

Rebecca and Clayton had settled into a neat way of life and they had not spoken again about that fateful night. Clayton had moved into Rebecca’s house, because she would not leave her garden. Clayton, after much separation anxiety, parted with his apartment and the long, painful memories that had kept him there. The months were warm and beautiful for them and Clayton developed a strong bond with George. He discovered the joy of the love of a father figure and enjoyed every minute of it, even when he and George disagreed.

They went to Mayville to visit, but Clayton would not stay more than one night. He liked to have Rebecca in their own bed, where they talked and teased each other. Clayton was

amazed at how much he craved a family life and Rebecca's parents gave him that. He spoke occasionally to his own parents, but made no effort to meet with them, or to introduce Rebecca to them. George became his friend and mentor and they discussed many things, from world politics to their beloved women. This relationship was also important to Rebecca, because she spent more time with her mother and they became close, in the absence of her father's dominating personality. At home, she enjoyed Clayton's protection and love and curled up next to him every night, content and happy.

For both of them, their lives were so perfect that they convinced themselves that the curse did not exist. They were happy to continue this way, things unchanging.

But, it was not to be.

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## Chapter 27

Clayton and Jonathan prepared a beautiful party. They used John's caterer and Rebecca's house looked magical and romantic when the guests arrived. Candles and lamps burnt gently in the garden, casually entwined with her flowers and plants. They invited many friends and amongst them, Zane and John, who were the first to arrive.

Zane had not been able to contain his curiosity at what the 'love den' looked like and had dragged John as soon as he could. He was slightly taken aback when he got to the house. It had an air of peace and quiet about it, a magical romance that was not consistent with Clayton's raw, animal lust. *Well, he thought, all of us live under false pretences. We all try to give the world a different impression about who we really are.* He glided around the house, unashamedly inspecting everything. Despite his meticulous inspection, he could find nothing to support this fundamental belief that they lived a raucous, debauched life. He watched them, Double J clearly wonderfully in love, touching each other and smiling and the other couple as well. This was interesting. Clayton was talking to the sexy Candice. He was smiling and laughing at something she was saying. Rumor had it that he went out with her for at least two weeks, which had been a long time for Clayton.

Rebecca was talking to hunk Brad, but she was watching Clayton. She looked like she could kill him. Clayton looked up at her and he smiled at her. *Wow, the guy is good.* They were having a fight across the room with their eyes, while he was entertaining his sexy ex.

*Clayton, who is that?*

*An old friend, Candice. She works with Jackie sometimes.*

*Lover?*

*No, you are my lover, remember?*

*Well, if she touches you one more time, I will kill the both of you.*

*Jealous? Princess? What did you think I felt when you hugged Brad so tightly?*

*Yes, arrogant swine. Brad is hurting. He wasn't trying to get into my pants. That woman is trying to seduce you. I am very jealous.*

*Serves to right, you should know me better. Relax, enjoy.*

*Piss off! I will make you pay for that!*

*I hope so!*

Clayton was laughing and Rebecca was furious. *That arrogant man. He thinks everything is funny.* Then she remembered her mother's advice. *Well, I can find things funny too. Seduce you with my mind.*

Clayton had his back to her now. He loved making her angry, the way her eyes flashed at him. Tonight would be good when all these people left.

*Clayton?*

*Not now, we'll discuss it later, can't you see.... oooh.*

*Like that?* as her mind slowly stripped off his shirt.

*Rebecca, behave, please.*

*No! Not a chance,* as her hands caressed his chest.

Clayton tried to continue talking and he turned his back on her, but Rebecca had taken control of his mind, her hands caressing him, slowly moving down and when she touched his belt, he excused himself from Candice and went to her.

*Wench!*

*What's the matter, darling, can't keep your pants on?*

She threw her head back and laughed.

"Rebecca, you are out of control. How did you do that?"

"It is a family secret. Now, no more touching sexy woman who seem so intimate with you?"

"Okay, but... Zane, hello. Good of you to come."

"Thank you for inviting us. It is a great party. I love this house. Everything is so perfect."

"Yes, we love it too. Would you like a drink, Zane?"

Clayton was relieved for the intervention, because he knew that Rebecca possessed his mind now. If she was really angry, she would drive him crazy, right there. It felt absolutely wonderful.

“Yes, please. Vodka with orange juice would be great.”

“Okay, vodka coming up,” and he strode off for the drink.

“John is a magnificent man, Zane. Clayton has been singing his praises.”

*Oh no, now Clayton wants my man.*

“Really, why?”

“Oh, he was helpful with this party. Jono and Clayton were trying to prove that they are not sexist and tried to do this on their own. I think they figured they couldn’t do it, so John helped them out. Relax. Clayton is *not* interested in him in *that* way.”

“Well, you never know. John is so gorgeous that straight men sometimes look at him. I find it quite disturbing.”

“Oh Zane, he adores you. I don’t think you have to worry about that.”

“I guess you are right. Anyway, how are things with you?”

“Fine, Clayton drives me crazy sometimes, pushes me right to the edge, then he is sweet and gentle again, you know?”

*I do know, my dear, I do know,* thought Zane.

“Poor thing. He looks so ferocious sometimes.”

Rebecca laughed.

“No, he is very gentle, actually, but very naughty.” She was smiling.

Jonathan was walking towards them.

“Hello, my princess. I can’t call you that anymore. Clayton has taken over that. Thanks for everything.” He was hugging her.

“No problem. I believe Clayton was a bit hard on Jackie?”

“Yes, but it worked. She is like a gentle lamb now. I must thank him.”

Zane’s eyes were wide.

“What are you talking about? That sounds awful.”

“Yes, it was.”

Jonathan laughed.

“Clayton knows exactly how to deal with Jackie. She had been giving me a really rough time, fighting all the time. Clayton has always known how to tap into her and has succeeded in getting her back to normal. He knows exactly what she needs.”

“Yes, it is wonderful. Jackie also knows how to deal with Clayton. When he is out of control, I send him to Jackie and he comes back as good as new.”

“My, that is very convenient isn’t it?” Zane was flabbergasted. *They admit to all this? It is wonderful?* He excused himself and went to find John.

~ ~ ~ ~

Clayton was tired, but he was a very happy man. He loved what Rebecca did to him at the party. She would attack him as soon as he thought she had forgotten. She really was full of surprises, this delightful woman of his. He had never expected to meet her woman who would deliciously shock him half to death, then gently make love to him inside his head, while he was trying to concentrate on some conversation. He loved the way she had taunted him, taking him so far, and then, when he thought he would burst, she would pull back again. Being a Protector had turned out to be a lot better than ever. He watched her, sleeping soundly. He really loved her, even when she treated him like an idiot who did not understand anything. He eventually slept thinking how great it was that tomorrow was Saturday and they would spend the morning in bed. I am the luckiest man alive, he thought as he fell off to sleep, his arm possessively over her.

Rebecca was enjoying the depths of her sleep when she saw her Nana. Nana was not smiling. She looked at Rebecca, her head tilted to one side, a quizzical look on her face. She was in a large field, filled with bright yellow flowers. *What flowers are those?* Rebecca thought. Nana seemed confused. *What is it Nana?*

*Rebecca, why do you do nothing? Why do you let your friend pay the price of your love? Why Rebecca? When it is so easy to stop it? Why? There are two Protectors, remember that my dear. Why Rebecca?*

Nana was looking sad and confused. Then she started fading and in the field, she saw a little baby girl, wrapped in a soft blue blanket, with The Darkness flying around it. It went round in circles, flapping its wings. She could hear the flapping, the hissing. In the far corner, she saw a shadow, a woman. She tried to look closer at the shadow, trying to see the woman, but she was fading away. Her body was bent over, like she was crying. The images suddenly stopped. Clayton was saying something.

“Rebecca, please, wake up.”

“Clayton?”

“Rebecca, what is the matter? You are crying in your sleep.”

She realized that tears were rolling down her face. She turned away from him. *Oh no, it was starting all over again.* She was crying loudly now and Clayton tried to control his emotions. He was getting angry, because she was giving him the silent treatment, but he

was so worried because she was crying so much. *Control yourself, or she will just shut off.* But he eventually lost it.

“Rebecca, stop crying, *now*. Tell me what the fuck is going on. Now, Rebecca. Now.”

She just cried. He turned her around and she closed her eyes.

“Look at me dammit, look at me!”

She opened her eyes and Clayton was completely astounded by the fear in her eyes. *The Darkness is back?*

“Yes, Clayton, it is back.”

She told him everything, every detail and every description. Clayton felt so numb. He could not think clearly.

“Rebecca, are you pregnant?”

“No, Clayton, of course not. What are you talking about?”

“Where is the baby girl, Rebecca where?”

“I don’t know. It was not my baby. I am sure of that, because it was outside of me, some distance away. Clayton, the woman, she was so familiar, her short gold dress, it moves with the flowers... she looked...”

“A short gold dress?”

Clayton felt his heart sank. There is no other woman who wore a gold dress with such remarkable grace.

“Jackie,” they said together.

“Oh God, No, Clayton, no, that cannot be. That is not fair. It is not right, no.”

“How can it do that? Simply transfer to her? She is not related to you.”

They talked and talked, asking many questions and answering none. The only thing they were certain of was that they would not tell Jonathan and Jackie. They had enough troubles already.

“I think Jackie has known all along. When I spoke to her, she kept telling me that if something went wrong, it was on her head. She knew, deep down, that something was wrong. That is why she was so strange.”

“But, Clayton, I think Jono feels it to. Do you remember he would not want her to leave the house and she could not go shopping?”

“Yes, I remember thinking that Jono, the logical one, had lost his marbles. What are we going to do, Rebecca?”

They sat on the bed, well into the morning, their despair and fear making them helpless to move. Finally Clayton phoned his friend and fellow-Protector.

~ ~ ~ ~

Jonathan was having a leisurely Saturday morning with his wife. They gossiped about the party and laughed at all the odd things people did. They joked about Clayton, how they were relieved he had not become a tiger and Jackie told Jonathan how Rebecca had seduced and tortured Clayton with her mind.

“I know. Clayton called me outside. He said he needed to get away from her. It’s quite amazing, isn’t it, that she can do that to him? He was enjoying it at some level, let me tell you. He kept saying, ‘that incredible woman. Just when I think I know her, she pulls some surprise’. He was totally trapped in the power of her lust.”

“Yes, it is too delicious.”

But Jonathan was thinking how delicious his wife had been last night. He was beginning to really like her pregnant. She was so horny all the time and so creative. He wished she could be pregnant forever, because this pregnancy was certainly doing wonders for him in the bedroom department. He smiled, thinking how lucky they were.

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## Chapter 28

Clayton read the spell over and over. He had been initially shocked at seeing it in print, because it made everything so real for them. All along, he had tried to pretend it was not real, that there was a reasonable explanation for these strange events. Seeing it there, in print, coming from his printer, had made his hair stand up. Then as he read it again, he had been mortified by the evil of it, that way the words clever, calculated and deliberate. He had also never fully appreciated, before that moment, how powerful the hatred and evil had been which had created the spell. Now, his mind was reeling over the last part.

*Let this spell be so bound*

*To invoke the evil sight and sound*

*Of The Darkness which will give no love, joy or celebrations*

*To all the allies and runt born of Portia McGuire for many generations.*

It took him quite a while to realize how significantly every carefully crafted word was designed for impact. He had not been able, until now, to understand why Jackie, not related to either of them, could be affected by the spell. That witch had been very clever.

‘To all the allies....’ She had anticipated that others would try to help them and she had realized that, through love, the ‘runt of Portia’ would be strengthened. That is exactly what Jackie and Jonathan had done. They had given them so much support and help and had even come up to the mountain to them. Now they were being punished. He felt his anger rising again and looked at Rebecca.

She looked like she was heavily sedated, sitting there, looking out the window. She had tried so hard, like him, to dismiss the curse and its implications. She was thinking how abnormal she was and he could see her guilt at bringing Double J into the mess. He saw her, sitting there, allowing her guilt to eat away at her. He could not allow it. He needed her as strong as ever now.

“Rebecca, come sit here. Talk to me, let it out, Princess.”

For once she did not argue. She told him her thoughts and Clayton, forever the Protector, talked her out of her fears.

“Remember, Rebecca, that you are not responsible. We have no choice in these issues. And that is what pisses me off the most. You have never had a choice.”

She stood up and rubbed his shoulders.

“You are becoming a tiger, Clayton. Relax.”

She kissed him on his cheek and rubbed his shoulders until she could feel his tension easing.

“Clayton, we need to try and keep each other calm about this. We need to focus on the problem. Okay?”

“Yes, I am glad your father sent this to us. It makes it easier to work through it. I understand why Double J are affected. What I can’t seem to work out, is this last part. What does it mean, Rebecca?”

Rebecca looked at the words, unable to touch the page.

“That bitch. She called me a *runt*?”

“Yes, it is rather odd, so derogatory. But, Princess, stop fighting with some unknown dead witch. Every time you read it you get upset again. Focus, remember?”

“Okay, but Clayton, I want to get her, that bloody miserable, vile animal.”

“Princess, please. Please.”

She read it out loud.

*Let this spell be unbound and apart taken*

*Only by the energy of the power of love which remains unshaken.*

*Let its power to drained and extracted*

*Only by the power of two Protectors, together contracted*

“So we only succeeded in the first part. All we did was took it apart at the mountain. Clayton, I think my father was right. It *does* seem to be much weaker. I think that is why it attacked Double J. They are second prize. When you and my father were here together, it seemed to have disappeared. The key is ‘two Protectors, together contracted.’ That is what seemed to affect it the most. The two of you together. What does it mean?”

“I don’t know. That is the part I cannot work out. How do we do it? Your mother says we need to invoke the power of light, which can destroy the darkness thingy. Rebecca, before you say anything, I want you to listen carefully. We are playing around now. We don’t have the time. Once that baby is born, we are back to square one and I don’t think we or Double J can live with that. None of us want to articulate the answer, but I am going to. We need to bring the light again, together with your parents.”

“Oh Clayton, I know. I have tried not to think about it, but I know.”

She covered her eyes with hands.

“I hate when you do that.”

“What have I done?”

“You get straight to the issue, while I am trying to get my head to admit what my heart knows.”

“I hate it when you stall like that, as if things will change if you pretend they are not there. It does not help, neither does your silence. You are afraid you might die again, so why don’t you say it? Why don’t you just let it out?”

“Because it is hardly an easy thing to say, ‘honey, I might die, are you okay with that?’ Face it Clayton. That is not normal.”

His eyes were an icy blue.

“Rebecca, I am not going to say this again. There is no such a thing as normal. There is no such a thing. Will you give it up? What is normal is whatever we are.”

He stormed out, and went into the garden. He was losing it, which was not helping. He wanted to shake her, get her to at least accept the basics so they could deal with the real problems. *Normal? That had nothing to do with it.* He was pacing up and down, trying to calm himself, but with little success. *I want to shake her until she gets it.*

Rebecca went to the phone. *I can’t deal with Clayton now. I need some sanity.* She phoned Jackie, but she was out. She phoned her parents and spoke to her mother. Her soothing voice was so cool that Rebecca felt herself relax. Her mother was prepared for it,

she could tell. She knew that she was the only one, the one they waited for and it bothered her.

“Rebecca, darling, this is the only way. If one of us dies, then at least we have saved many generations. That is what your father and I say. It might be worth dying to save all the other children. So, if that is what you are worried about, we have accepted that one of us, or all have to pay that price.”

“I know Mum, I know. Also, I am pissed off that it went for Double J. They have nothing to do with this. Nana was just giving them a wonderful gift and it turns it into something ugly. I know that you are right. But I am so pissed off.”

“It will pass soon, baby. Think of saving the baby. That is the important thing. It will help you feel better. Where is Clayton?”

“Pacing like a tiger. We are fighting and he paces out there.”

“Call him to the phone. Your father will calm him.”

“Clayton, phone,” she called and went to the kitchen. He glared at her as he passed and went to the phone. When she went back into the lounge, he was laughing at something her father said.

“Yes, charm her, hmm, and then she will just do as I say? Okay, will do.”

He was smiling at her.

*Is that all you think about?*

*Yes, do you have an objection?*

*Yes, no, oh go away.*

*Come here.*

*Okay, but only in the interests of peace.*

*Really? I thought your body might be interested too.*

“Yes, I see what you mean. I will talk to your stubborn daughter and see if I can charm her to agree. I will call you later.”

She was snuggling close to him now.

“Clayton, sorry about that.”

“Yes, me too. We are just getting stressed. If we fight again, you must do that mind thing. It will definitely calm me down.” He laughed.

“Your father says it is much weaker and that we should pounce now, because as the baby grows, so too does it grow in strength. We will do it on Wednesday night, because the moon is full and we are going to them. Your mother knows where the yellow flowers are.

Some place called Ferncliff Forest. Also, no sex on Monday and Tuesday to build up our energy.”

“What else, Clayton?”

“What do you mean?”

“What else did my father say? Well, he said we might not be able to shock each other afterwards again. Or even to talk with our minds.”

“Are you sad?”

“Of course. I quite enjoyed all that power. I liked the way you would shout at me and call me names. I will miss all that. It has been an incredible journey. Are you willing and ready to do it?”

“Yes, I don’t see that we have a choice. There is no point in playing games, as you say.”

“Your father said the fact that we never really considered not doing it is important. You know. The power of love.”

“How could we have chosen not to do anything? We could never put Double J through all this. Clayton that is inconceivable.”

“Yes, Princess, but that is the point. We acted out of love for them. That will see us through it.”

“Yes, I see, but Clayton, I am not afraid of dying. It was not that bad.”

Clayton was raising his eyebrows.

“Really. I am afraid of living without you, that’s my reluctance. But mother says if we die to stop it, then we must accept that.”

“Yes, if the only answer is that we die and then at least we have done the right thing with our lives. But, Princess, we must not think about that, not now, not ever. It will use it against us, remember? We must think of the power of love, how love has made us happy.”

She nodded and he continued.

“Now, can you make me happy, so that I will remember it in my hour of darkness and possibly excruciating pain?”

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## Chapter 29

The four of them arrived at midnight. It was dark and the wind was gently blowing in the trees. They made their way through the trees, both Protectors holding the women's hands.

"It is so beautiful here Clayton, we must come back in the day and have a picnic."

"Yes, I wish we had come earlier. It feels like such an unspoiled piece of the earth. Okay, will bring picnic basket and beautiful princess, deal?"

"Deal."

*Good, the kids are ready for it.*

*Yes, I love the way they are helping each other, thinking about tomorrow.*

*Yes, Rebecca is handling this very well. And you, my dear?*

*I am fine. I need to do this, always have. You know how I lived with the guilt.*

*Yes.*

"Mum, are you sure you have everything?"

"Yes, your father made me check at least three times. That bag is full of all my magic tricks. He also made me pack a few other contingency items. We are good to go, Rebecca. Tell me about work."

"I have a new patient. He is very sweet. He has giggling eyes. He is nine years old, but has a terrible bed-wetting problem. When we talk, he simply stares at me in fascination and giggles. I hope he gets over it, otherwise I won't be able to help him."

"He is very sweet. I like the way he held your hand possessively when I came in, as if you belonged to him. He has a major crush on you. He is going to try and stay in therapy for as long as possible. I can't say I blame the boy, especially because the father also seems to want to 'visit' you all the time. They are patients for life, I'm afraid."

"You see what I put up with. He inspects all my patients and their parents. I think I should go and check out those offices of his. There are a lot of pretty, young women there. That is what I will do."

"My pleasure, come and have a look. You will be disappointed though. They think I'm awful, so they avoid me. I am the big bad wolf, because I just don't seem to have much time for them. They will probably sympathize with you, thinking how hard it must be on you to put up with me."

"I have to find out about that. Anyway. I had a strange call this morning. From Zane."

"What did nosy parker want?"

"I'm not sure. But he wanted to know something, but could not bring himself to ask. I told him you were behaving wonderfully and he seemed a bit disappointed."

"I know, he told me that I was not suitable for you, that you are a class act."

He was laughing. "You should have seen his face when he saw us together that weekend. His eyes battled to stay in his head. We are just too interesting for him."

"I know. I wish I could say something ridiculous, so he would have some gossip, but I always forget."

"Tell him you are witch and that Clayton is under your spell. That will sort him out."

Rowena said.

"Yes, that has worked for us. Once, a prying neighbor was obsessed with Rowena and me. Once we told her that, she did not come near us again. She was too scared. She moved onto the other neighbors and unfortunately for her, that couple and their daughter are serious, practicing witches."

They were laughing as they made their way. Then Rowena spoke quietly.

"There, to the left, that clearing. That is where we are going."

Clayton and Rebecca could not see much, but could see, just on the edge of the clearing, an array of flowers, swaying gently with the wind.

"Okay, let the games begin." George said.

He unhooked the bag from his back and started taking out jars and candles. The old couple was used to making magic together and they worked quietly while they sprinkled herbs on the ground and lit large white candles. Clayton was holding Rebecca and watching in fascination. He had never seen a ritual before and he liked the way it made him feel. Rowena called them into the circles of candles and they stood together, all four of them holding hands. They stood like this for a while, while Rowena was invoking all sorts of people for protection. Clayton had no clue who they were, but thought, if they can protect us, all the better.

Then Rowena said. "Okay, let us invoke the light."

Clayton touched Rebecca's back and slowly moved his hands until they were on the butterfly. As he placed his mark on it, the light started. It was faint at first, but grew stronger as they stood. Then George placed his hand on Rowena's ring and their light shot into the air. When they had enough energy, the two Protectors, with their hands, guided the light, gently, until their long beams of light touched.

*Be gone, Darkness, there is nothing for you here.*

The women chanted in unison, over and over. Then suddenly, they heard the sound of breaking glass and the shrieking. It was just a whimper and the sound was not loud or strong.

Then Rowena said, in a large clear voice:

*Power of the light*

*Burning bold and Bright*

*Banish forever the Angel of Darkness and Pain*

*That all so affected, in joy and happiness, may regain and retain*

*Their power of love and power of light*

*Power of the Light*

*Bring to my sight*

*The token of the binding of Portia McGuire*

*So that it may be buried to retire*

*The Curse of the Darkness is now unbound and apart taken*

*By the energy of the power of love unshaken*

*Let its power to drained, maimed and extracted*

*At this moment, by the power of the two Protectors, together contracted*

*By the power of love and energy*

*So mote it be.*

They stood there, two bright beams of light, fused together at the top like a triangle. Nobody spoke and Clayton could feel Rebecca wavering.

“I love you, Rebecca.”

“I love you, Clayton, very, very much.” She took her cue quickly.

Rowena and George did the same and they heard a swishing sound and there, through the light, pieces of long brown hair tumbled to the earth. After a while, they all settled on the floor and in one flash of light, all the threads of the hair were bound together, as if by a ribbon.

“Okay, slowly, release your light.”

Clayton removed his hand from Rebecca and she turned to him and they held each other, unable to speak. Rowena and George released the light and George fell to the ground.

“George, George! Not now. Wake up! Wake up!”

Rowena was screaming at him.

Clayton went over to him, "George, I need you now, more than ever. Turn back now. There is nothing in those passages. Rowena is here. Turn back."

And he took his right hand and rubbed him gently across the heart.

"Clayton, my boy, I love you, but not that much."

Clayton looked at him and he winked.

"He is okay."

Clayton said with relief, as George laughed. There he was lying on the ground, laughing his head off at Clayton's shocked horror, at his wife and daughter's tears. They had no sense of humor. All he had done was gone down to regain some of his energy. He had seen the dark passage and knowing Rebecca's experience, he had turned back immediately. Or so he wanted to believe. They never discussed it again. Clayton knew what had happened. He had been there when it happened to Rebecca. *Okay, he does not want to talk about it. Fine by me*, he thought.

They drove silently to Rowena and George's house. It was an anti-climax. Clayton was been all prepared to have his back stripped and Rebecca to die. They had survived, and as Nana had said, it had been relatively easy.

They sat on the patio having a drink.

"Is it really over?"

"Yes, I think so. I have buried the hair in my garden. At least I know it is safe there."

"How did they get a piece of Portia's hair? It seems a lot of hair for her not to notice." Clayton said.

"They were friends. She properly offered to style it, I guess. I don't know." Rowena replied.

"Does this mean we will be 'normal' now?" Rebecca asked and Clayton's eyes flashed at her.

"Sweetpea, you have always been normal. But I think you are asking whether you can talk to Clayton in his head. Well, Rowena and I were just making after dinner plans just now, so I guess so."

"I have a confession to make." Rowena said sweetly. Clayton rolled his eyes. *Like mother like daughter*.

"When I thought of how to unbind the spell, I was told to use as much of it as possible. I did slip in a small little bonus to us. Remember I said 'may regain and *retain* their power of love and power of light'? What did you think I meant?"

"Mother, you didn't."

“I don’t understand. What?” Clayton and George were confused.

“I figured since you men have been so generous and given up so much to protect us, you needed a big, fat reward. George has been wondering around the house sulking, saying he would lose his power to ...well, shall I say, his special sexual powers. I added *retain.....the power of light*. I did not need that, but I figured, why not? Let them keep their powers, after all, they earned them.”

The men looked at each other and laughed. They had spoken on the phone on many occasions about how hard it would be to play by the rules again. They had quite enjoyed the games they could play as Protectors.

“I don’t believe it. Why didn’t you tell us?”

“Because that is all you would have been thinking about. It was too risky. I couldn’t afford to take the chance that you would focus on your selfish manly needs.”

“Rowena, you are wicked. You watched me tortured, thinking how I would actually have to *speak* to you? You let me go through all that?”

“Yes, my dear. But I think you should thank me, not shout at me.”

“Clayton please. Mother, what have you done? You should have stripped them of everything.”

“No, Princess, your mother is right. I like my compensation. It is most delightful. Thank you *very* much Rowena.” He was beaming.

“I think we should all go to bed now, seeing we worked so hard tonight. Rowena, George, good night. Princess, come, let me take you to bed.”

He held out his hand and she went to him quickly, for fear of what terrible comment her father would make. He just laughed and said, “Rowena, you know what? When I said I loved you out there in the dark, in the middle of nowhere, I think I actually meant it.”

Rebecca complained bitterly as Clayton woke her up at five in the morning. They had to get back to work and he had an appointment at nine.

“Clayton, please, let me sleep. Leave me behind. I will get home later. Please, leave me alone.”

“Rebecca, you are coming home with me. I am going to get you coffee and if you are not awake, I promise I will get back and shock you, understand?”

“Go away, arrogant swine.”

When he came back with the coffee, she was sitting upright, glaring at him.

“That’s better. Now, coffee and get ready. We have to leave soon. Your parents are already wondering the around the garden. They are talking to butterflies. What does that mean?”

“They are making a wish. Who knows? Don’t talk to me. I am asleep.”

Clayton was ready fast and he sat on the bed, monitoring her. He knew if he left she would just go back to bed.

She reluctantly dragged herself around, glaring at him occasionally.

*Arrogant swine!*

*Get dressed, Rebecca!*

*Hhhggghhhhh!*

*Get dressed, Rebecca!*

When they eventually got downstairs, her mood had improved and Clayton gave her a hard pat on her bottom.

“That’s my girl.”

“Piss off or I will torture you at work, in your appointments.”

He just laughed.

George was sitting in the kitchen, eating furiously.

“I am starving. That old crone really makes me work so hard.”

“I know the feeling.” Clayton laughed, as he gobbled a sandwich.

“George, I need to ask you something, privately.”

“Dad, if you teach him any funny tricks, I swear I will tell Mum to stop having sex with you.”

They ignored her and went outside. George was laughing and laughing. They spoke softly.

“Clayton wants to know if he can make love to you with his mind. George has just told him to he has to wait for you to initiate and then he can do it too. Clayton is telling your father that you torture him and he wants to pay you back. George says he can’t, he must just enjoy.”

“Mum, how do you know?”

“I am reading their lips.”

“Oh Mum, you are wonderful. Just for that, I will deal with him, when he least expects it.”

They left soon afterwards and Rebecca wanted to sleep again.

“Are you tired?”

“Of course, that light really drains me. Also, you were hardly a gentleman last night.”

“Go to sleep. You did not complain last night. Anyway, you came straight to my bedroom. You did not need an invitation. Sleep so I can think.”

Clayton felt relieved that they had performed the ritual last night. But he was still worried about Double J and Rebecca. How could they be sure that it was over? He wondered how they would know. He phoned their house.

“Clay darling, where have you been? We phoned last night and this morning.”

“Why, Jackie, what’s wrong?”

“Nothing, I don’t know. Is Rebecca with you?”

“Yes, but she is sleeping. Jackie, what is the problem?”

“Your butterfly came last night, in my dreams. It was complete and it fluttered around my tummy. Then it left. I didn’t feel scared, but when I told Jono, he went berserk.”

“Oh Jackie, I guess it was just trying to comfort you. You have been so worried about things going wrong. If it was complete, then that is definitely a sign that things are alright. Relax. It was just comforting you.”

Rebecca was fully awake now.

“Jackie, are you alright?”

“Yes, just that Jono is now pissed off. He keeps saying ‘what does it mean that you have taken over Clayton’s butterfly? Will we have the same problems?’ Over and over again.”

“Oh Jackie, you know how logical Jono is. He wants things neat and tidy. I’m sure it is alright, as Clayton says, just for comfort. Anyway, you are so close to Clayton, it just wants to help. Tell Jono to relax. Where is he?”

“He left just now. I think he was hoping to see Clayton to make himself feel better.”

“I will calm him down. I am on my way to work now, okay? We will pop over tonight for a drink. See you later.”

“So, not sleeping?”

“How can I? You are always on the phone.”

“Ouch, grouch. Are you busy today?”

“Not really. I have two appointments, and I thought I would get some other stuff done.”

“Try and go home and get some sleep.”

Rebecca left work midday and slept the whole afternoon and by the time Clayton came home, she was feeling freshened and in a much better mood.

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## Chapter 30

Clayton paced up and down the maternity ward. The hair on the back of his neck was standing up and his eyes were icy blue. He could not bear the waiting. *What is taking so long? If there were any complications or problems with this baby he would go to the mountain and rip that creature's heart out. He would do so with his bare hands. Where is Rebecca anyway?* He had phoned her a long time ago to tell her that Jackie had gone into labor. He was pacing, a furious and agitated man. The nurses who walked pass felt sorry for the mother, married to such a ferocious man. He heard the door on the end of the passage open and Jonathan stepped out. Jonathan stopped. *Oh no, does he have to do that tiger thing now? In the hospital, when J just had a baby?* He was wondering if Rebecca was okay, but just then, she came through the door and rushed to Clayton. She touched his shoulder and he turned.

*Clayton, what's wrong?*

*Nothing, where were you?*

*I got held up - long story. Is something wrong?*

*No, but if there is, I swear I will kill that thing myself.*

*Clayton, please, calm down before you scare the whole hospital off.*

She leaned over him and kissed him.

"Now, will you please *try* and calm down?"

"Yes, Clayton. This is not the time for one of your tiger tricks."

"Jono, is everything okay?" His eyes were still icy blue.

"Yes, we have a bouncing baby girl. She is beautiful, magnificent."

"Is J okay?"

"Of course. Clayton, what is the matter?"

"Nothing, I was just worried, that's all. I need to see them Jono, please, now."

"Will you stop behaving like a tiger first? Gosh, Clayton, relax."

They went into the ward and there was Jackie, looking drawn and tired, but laughing joyously when she saw them.

"Oh hello. I am so happy."

Clayton rushed to her and hugged her. "Are you okay?"

"Of course. There is our little girl."

The baby was lying in the cot, wrapped tightly in a blanket.

Clayton went straight to the cot and lifted the baby out. He held her gently, looking at her face. It was as if he was inspecting her. Then he looked at Rebecca

*Thank God, there is nothing. She is fine.*

“She is so beautiful, Double J. Congratulations.”

Rebecca was crying and Clayton went to her.

“It’s okay. It’s all over, Princess. It’s okay. They have a beautiful girl, just as you thought.”

“Excuse me, you two, but this is my moment, okay? *I* am the one who did all the work.” Jackie was laughing.

“It is a good thing this is not your baby, because the way you are acting, you would not cope in a million years.”

“Sorry Jackie. We have been so worried, you know.”

She hugged both of them and simply peeked at the baby.

“Jackie, how do you feel?”

“Absolutely fabulous. And Jono, he is beaming with glee. Look what I have done, he told the nurse. But I am also so tired.”

When they were leaving the hospital, Jonathan said. “You need to tell me something, don’t you?”

“Yes, but it is all fine. Go and keep your family company. Come over later to get some food and we will talk.”

~ ~ ~ ~

Jonathan just stared at them. He had always known that something would go wrong. He had felt it right from the beginning. How strange Jackie had been, how weird he had been. He had known that they were tied to Clayton in some odd way, but he never imagined his own precious daughter, not yet even born, would be the target of an assault.

“But Clayton, how do you know it is okay?”

“We destroyed it, Jono. It was still weak, so it was relatively easy. We made sure of that. We could not take the chance that it would live with her. We made sure.”

“Then why were you behaving like a tiger?”

“Because I was thinking, if there is a *hint* of trouble, I was ready for warfare. I had to ready, to be sure. But when I held her, I knew. It was my own anxiety, really. I am absolutely sure.”

“Are you telling me we had a baby because of some curse?”

“No, your baby has nothing to do with the curse. It simply saw a link to us and used the opportunity. It was a simple question of timing. It was getting weaker and just trying to ‘stay in circulation’. Your baby was simply an opportunity.”

“Why did you do it?”

“Oh Jono, what choice was there? There was no way we could have even thought of not doing it. Anyway, Rowena’s parents were also there. It was double trouble and the creature did not have a chance.”

“Clayton, you did it for my baby, even though you knew you might die or be beaten to death?”

“Yes, Jono, it had to be done. We could not tell you because you were anxious enough.”

“Was it that Wednesday, when Jackie saw the butterfly?”

“Yes. It was really telling her it is okay. You see, Jackie has known all along. That is why she went so crazy.”

“Jono, there will be no more funny things, I promise.”

Rebecca went to him and hugged him.

“Oh Rebecca, you took the chance that you might die for our baby?”

“Oh Jono, Clayton and I have a special power. It was not a big deal, if truth be told.”

Jonathan was crying now. He could not believe it that while he sat at home, ‘entertaining’ his wife; this pair had gone out into the bushes to protect his daughter.

“And your parents?”

“They said that if we die to protect the children, then we have lived a good life. They were very philosophical about it. Jono, they knew it was the only way. Remember, my mother is a white witch. She lives to heal. They did not even hesitate. It was the right thing for all of us. I’m sorry we never told you, but you would have gone crazy worrying. Also, there was nothing you could do but try to reason with us.”

“But Clayton, why didn’t you just wait until her Protector came?”

“That is exactly what we mean. You are logical and want to work through all the issue. We did it so she would not have to even know about Protectors.”

“I doubt that will happen. Clayton was already behaving like that on her first day.”

“Yes, I feel a special bond to her. Don’t worry. I will behave, except when those teenage boys come around. Boy, will I growl.”

He laughed when he saw the horror on Jonathan’s face. Rebecca laughed too.

“Whilst we are on the topic, although the spell is broken, Clayton still has his powers.”

“Oh no, Clayton, no.”

“Yes, we kept all the good things. Although, I have not been able to shock Rebecca for a while, because we used up all the energy, but in time, well...”

“Are you insane? Why can’t you just behave like everybody else, Clayton? Why the tigers, butterflies and God knows what else?”

“Because we are special. And I like it. I like that Rebecca can go into my mind and I like all the little things that have become a part of us. I was devastated when I thought we had lost all that power.”

“I will never understand that. But, I must say, I am very pleased that you had those powers. Our baby is lucky to have you, Clayton. I personally prefer to live without all that stuff. Now, I had better go to the hospital and check on my ladies.”

When Jonathan left, Clayton was staring at her, his eyes a dark blue.

“Rebecca, do you realize something?”

“What now?”

“That was the first time you accepted that you are normal. You said we have special powers. Not that we are abnormal.”

“Oh.... so what?”

“So, you have finally accepted that I am not some strange creature who entered your life. You accept me, Rebecca, as a man.”

“Well, do I have a choice?”

He held her. “Yes and you chose to accept me, at last.”

“Clayton, you are making a big deal out of nothing...” He was kissing her now.

“Stop pretending you don’t know what that means. You have accepted me as your man, not some paranormal creature, like you did in the beginning. So what does it mean, Rebecca? Tell me.”

“I don’t know what you are talking about. Leave me alone. Do you want some coffee? I will go and make some coffee.”

“Rebecca, you know how your stalling tactics piss me off. Do you want to piss me off today when I have been behaving like a tiger?”

He looked at her and his mind ripped her blouse off.

“Clayton, stop that. Okay, I will sit down, no coffee. Tell me what you are thinking.”

He was staring at her, a dark blue definitely on the way.

*Will you also accept me as your husband? A normal husband?*

*What?*

*You heard me.*

*Say it.*

*Why?*

*I want to hear the actual words, like all normal girls.*

*If you insist. Nagging already?*

*Arrogant swine.*

He was holding her hand, standing there in the middle of their lounge, when he asked his best dark blue question.

“Rebecca Raymond, will you marry me, normal, arrogant swine that I am, Protector of you, as I am?”

“Well, yes, I don’t have much of a choice do I? Who else will protect me, shock and make love to me in my head? Yes Clayton. Yes.”

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## **Chapter 31**

Rebecca and Clayton had a beautiful wedding. Despite the inconvenience to some of their guests, like his parents, they insisted that they would have it in the Dragon Mountains at the San Sanctuary. Clayton’s parents had stayed with them for a few days before the wedding and they agreed that Rebecca was good for Clayton. He had lost that boyish, wayward look and had an air of manly protection about him. He also adored her so much that his mother relaxed and accepted the girl. She was a little strange, but that was not surprising given her strange parents. They said they were witches, which was not funny at all. They did strange things in the morning, like talk to the plants and Anne Giles could have sworn she saw the mother talking to a butterfly. But no matter, the girl was good for Clayton and she was pleasant and charming. Also, she was a professional woman, who would not put the strain on him as his first wife had. She had her own life and they saw how she sometimes came home late because she was busy. They also liked the fact that their son seemed to come home early from work, something that he had never done in his first marriage. They never said any of these things to their son and were surprised to see how he had such a strong bond with George Raymond. They talked and laughed and shared secrets. Daniel Giles felt a little put out when he saw this. His son would never

whisper and talk to him. He only spoke about law, but even then, he said very little. But their son was happy and that was all that mattered.

The ceremony was outdoors and they looked staggeringly beautiful. Rebecca wore a white dress, which set off her dark eyes and hair and Clayton wore a black suit, which contrasted sharply with his azurite eyes. Jackie watched them, remembering the last time they were at this place. *Today, again, they stand here, the life force, in balance, the yin and the yang, opposite but equal forces. Well, also the green dragon and the white tiger. Never mind, that image does not work now.* She was thinking about how amazing they had been, how they had risked their own love and future for little Mia. She looked at Mia, so named by decree of Jonathan. He had gone mad when she wanted to call her Portia, or even Rebecca, because he was not willing to take any risk of association for his precious daughter with the Curse of Darkness.

“She needs to start her own life, no strings attached, make her own destiny. I will have no association with anyone, living or dead.”

He had decided that *his* daughter shall be named Mia and that was that. Mia, now four months old, was gurgling loudly, as their ceremony went on. *Okay, she agrees with them. Fine, fair enough.* Clayton, true to form, the Protector, looked up and smiled at Mia.

Jonathan groaned. *That bastard must not even try to play tiger now. I will rip his throat out.* But Clayton just smiled, as if he was having a conversation with her. This brought no comfort to Jonathan. He wished Clayton would not be so protective over *his* daughter. He did not like it, because, with Clayton, there might be butterflies, tigers and shocks. As much as he believed that it was over, he was taking no chances. Already Clayton would pick her up and she would smile like they were old friends. Once, she had been crying when Clayton paid one of his regular visits. He just picked her up and she stopped. Jonathan didn't like it one bit. But, then again, it was with Clayton's 'special powers' as he put it, that he had been so willingly to protect his daughter. He looked at Rebecca and he battled to believe that such a serene, exquisite woman had been followed around by a creature. It was beyond comprehension. And, standing there next to Clayton, it was even less imaginable that she was the 'source of his power'. She smiled sweetly and looked so vulnerable. She was nervous and Clayton was squeezing her hand. *At least they had the decency to behave like a normal couple, just this once.* But he spoke too soon. He saw her eyes flashing at him and the silent conversation began. *Oh, why could they not have saved that for their honeymoon? Really, Clayton must have started it because Clayton would not*

*be able to resist an opportunity to tease her. He looked around and nobody seemed to have noticed. Well, they seem to be making up now, thank God.*

Rowena and George watched the ceremony with tears in their eyes. Their precious Sweetpea had finally found her Protector and had finally beaten the curse. Rowena was so happy and George, so proud. They looked so beautiful together.

*The butterflies have never let us down.*

*I know. These two would have taken forever to get married.*

*George, what else did you wish for?*

*A son for them. A strong healthy boy who looks like Clayton.*

*George, I don't think he wants kids.*

*Well, then he is very confused. He loves Mia as if she was his own. If he doesn't have his own child, Double J will have to leave the country, the way he behaves.*

*I thought you told me not to interfere?*

*I didn't. I just helped them along.*

*You are a wicked man.*

*And you an old crone. Shut up, I want to hear the rest of the ceremony.*

Rebecca looked at her parents and smiled. *They are at it again.*

Clayton looked at her.

*Normal enough for you, Princess?*

*Yes, thank you, Protector.*

*For what?*

*For trying to give me what I thought I wanted.*

*Thought you wanted?*

*Yes, I always thought there was something normal out there, but look around, who might that be?*

*Us, of course.*

*Yes, Clayton, yes, I love you.*

*And I love you too, Princess. Now, please pay attention. It is your turn to take your vows. No mistakes or I will deal with you now.*

*Piss off arrogant swine and stop looking at Mia. You are making Jono nervous.*

*Yes, perhaps I shall make you nervous?*

But it was her turn to vow to love him and cherish him and she ignored his threats.

*Clayton?*

*Shhhhhhhhhhh.*

*I love you, I really do.*

*I love you too, but can you save your energy for later? You are going to need it.*

And he laughed out loud and she laughed with him. Everyone could not see what the joke was, but accepted that the couple had a private joke.

Later, Jonathan made an impassioned speech about his best friends. He started off by saying,

“Clayton, my friend here, has a belief that he is normal, but I want to tell you, today, that you are not. And Rebecca, my dear, you have all my sympathy.” Everybody laughed.

Clayton just smiled and Rebecca gave a look of mock fear of him.

*Don't tease me woman, remember later.*

*Go away, I want to hear this.*

“Despite their strange ways, this couple have been wonderful to my family. They have given us so much love and have done for us that few people would ever do. They have given to us, unconditionally and we will always thank them for that. They have shown us the full power of love.”

Mia was making noises again

“And even Mia agrees. Clayton and Rebecca, thank you so much for being the best friends we could have asked for. We know that you will be happy, even on your strange terms.”

Jackie looked at Rebecca and mouthed ‘thank you’. Rebecca had tears in her eyes.

*Don't cry Princess.*

*I have to. I am so happy.*

*Defying me already wife?*

*Yes, husband, get used to it.*

She went to Jackie and they hugged and she hugged Jonathan and cried. She went to her parents and they cried too. Clayton just stood near Jonathan

“So, did I behave?”

“Well this is the best you have been in a while. I got a bit nervous when you were having a silent fight. Visions of tigers and dragons.”

Clayton laughed. “She never listens to me. She always must have the last say.”

“Welcome to married life. You will soon learn that it is easier to agree than to fight.”

“Not a chance. I will just shock her.”

“I would not be surprised. Clayton, I am so glad that all this is over. I am so happy, really, because the two of you deserve it.”

“Thanks. But I will no doubt need you to keep me logical and sane.”

“Glad to be of service.”

Zane and John were approaching and definitely heard that. Zane was so pleased. He had wanted John to hear it himself.

“Congratulations, Clayton. This is a lovely wedding.”

“Thank you.”

“Jono that was a beautiful speech. That stuff about the power of love. I tell you, we all had tears in our eyes.”

“Well, I really meant it. Clayton here, ferocious as he might look, is a great friend, even though he likes to do strange things and has weird ideas about the world. All in all, he always comes through.”

“Oh, that is amazing. I must say, I never imagine you to be the marrying type, Clayton.”

“Yes, well I was lucky enough to meet the woman who could put up with my ‘strange and weird’ ways.”

He was laughing, because he could see that Zane had some seriously debauched thoughts in his mind. *Well, let me entertain him.*

“She is the only woman in the whole world who lets me shock her to high heaven.”

And Jono laughed. “Oh no, don’t start that, not in public, please.”

“Well, that sounds quite bizarre, Clayton.”

“Yes it is. That is why she is so special. I told you, she likes my weird ways.”

“Clayton what are you on about? What have you said to make Zane look so horrified?”

She was standing near Clayton now. “I just told him how you love my weird ways, don’t you Princess?”

He looked at her for a long while.

*Come on, he is looking for entertainment. Let’s give it to him.*

“Yes, I do. My favorite is when you become a tiger. That ferocious beast in you, oooohhh I get goose bumps thinking about it. Yummy.”

Jonathan, now realising that it all sounded so bizarre that nobody would believe Zane, joined in the fun. Zane and John were staring at them, their eyes wide.

“Come on, Clayton, what about your favorites? Well, like when she traps you in a web of lust and you can’t get out?”

“What do you mean, Jono?”

“Well, as you know, Rebecca here is a witch. She can trap a man in a web of lust and debauchery and there is nothing he can do, until she says otherwise.”

“Wow, you are a wicked couple, aren’t you?”

“Yes, would you like to try it, Zane?” Rebecca smiled sweetly.

John moved suddenly. Zane looked positively afraid.

“No thanks. Anyway, we won’t keep you from your guests. We had better run along.”

They had such a good laugh that Clayton battled to stand up straight.

“Now, do you believe me, John?”

“Okay, I admit that they are not quite the normal couple. Also, that speech of Jono’s, about being taught the full power of love and doing anything for them. Well, it was quite obvious.”

Zane was so happy that someone had at last accepted his fundamental belief that those four were depraved that he grabbed John and kissed him.

“I love you John. Now can we leave the weirdoes for something more regular? Our chalet must be getting so lonely without us.”

And they left, relieved to be outside the range of Clayton and Rebecca’s lust. Zane checked that the door was locked twice, ‘just to be sure’.

*Hello, crone, why so sad?*

*Not sad, just thinking how happy they look, laughing together.*

*I know, I am also happy, but Rowena, I want to go up there tomorrow.*

*Up where?*

*To the place my daughter died for love.*

*Oh George, do we have to? Can’t we leave well alone?*

*I just want to see it, to feel it, to know that she is okay.*

*Alright, I suppose with your own experience, it is important.*

*What experience?*

*I love you George.*

*I love you too, Rowena.*

They held hands, looking at their daughter and her Protector laughing so much.

Clayton was laughing, not just at Zane, but at his wife. She had no idea that he had worked hard to rebuild the energy in his left hand. George had taught him he could invoke its power with visualization and how he could ‘see’ how much power he had. He looked at his wife, laughing and teasing Jonathan and Brad. No doubt she was still trying to convince Brad that she was happy and safe. If only he knew how right his instinct had been about her. Her head was thrown back, and she touched Brad on his arm, teasing him about his red girl, who had managed to dump him again. Clay loved her so much and

tonight, he could not wait to see her face, her eyes flashing, when he shocked her to high heaven. He was patiently dealing with their guests, because he knew that the wait for his wife was worth it.

Rebecca looked at Clayton. At least he is in a good mood. She wanted to have a baby, as she had always known, but she was not sure how he would take it. He had always said that she must trust him with her thoughts and desires and this one was so strong, she knew she had to tell him. Tonight was the night, she decided. When he was relaxed and had a little too much to drink. When he was in the depths of his sleep, she would wake him and confess sweetly.

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## Chapter 32: Epilogue

Chloe sat on the front porch, watching the few people who walked past her house enjoying a Sunday morning stroll. She was tired and looked forward to a quiet Sunday morning. Her three kids were gone to the Mayville Youth Activity Centre two streets away, where they were entertained with sports and games. She was thinking about her husband Derek, how he had just left them with no word or explanation, almost two years ago. She thought about how she had first learned to hate him and then miss him and eventually, she had accepted his betrayal. She could never understand how a professional man with professional responsibilities could simply walk out of his wife and move away with a young waitress from the local pub. *What makes a man do such a thing?* She knew that she would always feel hurt and betrayed by him, especially because it has taken him four months to remember his three children and to phone them.

She pondered the pattern that had marked her family and their lives. Her mother and her grandmother had lived the same pattern as her now. Both had three children and both had been abandoned by their seemingly good husbands. *What is it about us that make men leave? Why don't they decide to leave in the beginning? Before you are settled and have three children?* Chloe thought of her mother with great sadness. She had never gotten over her father's betrayal and had spent the rest of her life ravaged by twin emotions of hatred and self-pity. She had lost her will to live by the time she was forty-five, but had lived to the ripe old age of seventy-three. It had been a long and tortured life. Her father, begging for forgiveness over the years and had finally given up and moved away. None of them

saw him again and had no idea whether he was still alive. Chloe wondered what it would have been like had he stayed with them. Would he have been a good father? Her twin brothers, who were six years old when he left, had fond memories of him and she knew they secretly believed that their mother had turned him away. She had only been six months old when he left and when he came over the years to try and speak to their mother, he was simply one of her mother's 'friends'. Chloe never regarded him as her father, nor did her mother want her to.

Perhaps her mother had been right about their family. She had cried over the years, lamenting 'The Curse of the Darkness', saying that their great-grandmother Felicia, had hexed some friend of hers and the spell had worked on her family instead. But Chloe did not believe in magic. For her, the explanation was rational. Each of them had grown up with dysfunctional parents, so they learned that behavior. So, when her brother Timothy phoned to say he had left his wife for some younger woman, she had not been surprised. In her mind, that is what he had lived and learned. Only Trevor, the other twin, seemed stable and seemed unlikely to leave his wife. But Trevor was not a happy man. He was dull and uninspired and his wife controlled him like a naughty child.

Chloe sighed. *Where would it end? Will my children also behave like this? Will my children have such bad luck in relationships?* She had tried so hard to make a difference this time. Derek had seemed like the right kind of man who would provide the stability and love she had badly craved. He had been a warm and loving husband, most of the time and she had believed it would work. The odd thing about Derek leaving and what infuriated her the most was that he seemed unable to explain his actions. They had had a bitter fight.

"What do you mean you don't know why you did it? You are a grownup, Derek. At least have the decency to take responsibility."

"But Chloe, I want to be honest with you. I am not going to give you some bullshit explanation to make you feel better. I don't know how I moved from being your husband, to some sleaze-bag who chases younger women. I don't know, because until it happened to me, I would despise men who did that. I don't know."

"Well, when you know, speak to me about it. You've had your fun, now you want to come back? Are you crazy? Get out!"

However, in the last year, since the night she dreamt of an old lady with short red hair, her attitude towards Derek had softened. When he came round to see the children, she was

civil and sometimes, he even made her laugh. She did not know what had happened that night, but the old lady had taken her back in her life, when things were so good with Derek. She had also shown Chloe an image of the two of them, old and grey, sitting outside on this porch, watching the people walk by. That image had tugged at her heart and when Derek brought her flowers a few weeks ago, she had been beaming. She wanted to be with him now, but she could not bear him doing the same thing. She knew he missed her and the children, but she was not ready to forgive him yet.

She looked up and saw the Raymonds walking by. They waved at her and Mrs Raymond walked up to the stairs.

“Hello, Chloe, how are you?”

“Fine, thank you. I did not see you these last few days. Have you been away?”

“Yes, our daughter Rebecca got married on Friday, so we only got back this morning. We missed our neighborhood and friends. Where are those delightful kids of yours?”

“They are spending the day at the Activity Centre, so I will get some peace.”

“Oh Good. We saw your husband earlier in the week and he spent time speaking to George. My dear, he loves you very much. One day, you will understand, but it was not his fault.”

“What? I’m sorry. I don’t ....want to talk about it.”

“I know, dear. But remember that it was not your fault either. Both of you were victims of circumstances beyond your control. In this house, you will learn the power of love. It belonged to my mother, Nana, as we called her. With love, comes forgiveness.”

“Thank you for trying to help, Mrs Raymond, but I think we will be alright.”

“Okay, we will be off now, bye.” They waved and were gone.

Chloe was thinking how nosy and presumptions the old couple had been. But she had the nagging feeling about something. The name Nana, it bothered her. Was she not the old woman who had come to her in her dreams? She had said she was Nana. Also, the old woman had also said something about the power of love and forgiveness and that stuff about victim of circumstance. Rowena Raymond was her daughter, so they probably thought in the same terms. But she kept thinking back to the way Derek had looked at her when he told her he could not explain. He had been totally honest with her, anguished by his own inability to explain these events. Was it possible, that there was really a Curse? What did the Raymonds have to do with it? Why were they so keen to get her to take Derek back? What did they care? Maybe they were Derek’s friends, trying to help him. *Yes, that was it.* She phoned Derek and he sounded half-asleep.

“Derek, I need to ask you something.”

“Good morning Chloe. How are you?”

“How do you know the Raymonds?”

“Who?”

“You know, Rowena and George. The old couple who live further down the road. You know, the old man with flashing black eyes and.....”

“Oh yes, I don’t know them. They came to me one day and just talked. They seemed to know me and I assumed you knew them. They spoke like they knew your family, some relative of yours, Felicia or Allison. I don’t know. Why?”

“I just had a strange conversation with them. Did they say something about Felicia?”

“Yes, they said it was her fault that you and I were having....ur.. problems.”

“That makes no sense. Felicia is my maternal great-grandmother. She had been dead for at least 100 years.”

“Oh, I must be mistaken. They must have used some other name.”

“Derek, tell me again why you left.”

There was a long silence.

“Please, Chloe, I just woke up. I don’t want to say the same thing and we will fight. Tell me what you want me to say. I love you. And I want to be with you. Please, tell me what you need to hear and I will say it.”

“Derek, this is important. Tell me the truth.”

Derek was confused. Should he simply make up something to appease her? *What do you tell your wife when you get up one day and take a long trip with a strange, childish waitress, don’t phone her or your children, even though you have been missing them?*

What does a man say? How does he explain the pain of waking up, missing her laughter, her fighting, her teasing and even her bold, untamed anger? *What is the right answer?*

Well, he would simply tell her the truth because that was all he had.

“I don’t know, I don’t know. I don’t know what happened, Chloe. I can’t give you an explanation.”

“Okay, thank you. Sorry to disturb you. I know how you like to sleep on Sundays. Bye.”

*What, no screaming at him, about taking responsibility? About being a proper father? She had actually been nice this time. What is going on?* Perhaps he was having a dream. He tried to call her back, but she was busy on the phone. *Is she losing it?* He got out of bed, and went over. His flat was nearby by and when he got there, she was at the gate, about to go out.

“Hello, Derek. A bit early for you?”

“Chloe, what is going on? I was worried about you. Are you alright?”

“Yes, Derek, I need to go to the Raymonds. There is something strange going on. When I phoned them to say I want to talk, they seemed relieved. Why?”

“What are you talking about? Chloe, what strange things?”

“Look, I don’t know exactly, that is why I have to see them. I will speak to you later.”

“No, you won’t, I am coming with you, okay?”

“Are you sure?”

“Absolutely. If there are strange things, then I don’t want you to be there alone.”

They walked silently up to the Raymonds’ house. As they reached the top step, George opened the door.

“Oh I am very pleased that Derek came with you. Please come in. Rowena is making some tea.”

Rowena walked in, pleasant and friendly, offering them tea and cake.

*Did you bring the husband?*

*No, I thought you did.*

*Well, it is better this way.*

“Chloe, you said you wanted to talk. We will save you the awkwardness of asking seemingly odd questions. I think let us start at the beginning.”

Rowena pulled out a copy of the spell.

“Read this, and then we will talk. George and I will go into the garden, to give you some peace.”

*Do you think they will believe it?*

*It doesn’t matter. At least we tried. Nana said we must at least try.*

*You are right. I hope they work it out.*

They watched the couple through the window.

Rowena said. “He says we seem like a nice couple so they need to hear what we have to say. She says she doesn’t believe in this nonsense, but yes, something is odd so they will listen. Okay, let’s go in, George.”

“Okay. Now. This spell is the one your great-great grandmother Felicia cast on my great-grandmother, Portia. After a long search, we found it. Apparently, the woman who created it was so proud of her handy work, she shared with everyone and we found it on the Internet. It is called the Curse of the Darkness. Until some twelve months ago, it was

working nicely against my family and clearly yours. My daughter and her husband have removed it. Now, you can live a normal life.”

“Look, I do not believe in magic and curses and things. I don’t know how it works and it is too unreal for me. Assuming that I believe it, why would we suffer under it? I mean, it was intended for your family, not mine.”

“Yes, well, Felicia did not think about it or did not know. But one of the fundamental principles of Wiccan is the ‘three-fold rule’. Everything you do comes back to you three times.”

Chloe was so white that she looked like she would faint. *Who were these people? I had just been thinking about the coincidence of three children...*

Derek saw that there was something wrong, but was plagued by questions.

“How did you know who Chloe was?”

“My son-in-law, Clayton, walked past Chloe one day. He has, shall we say, very strong instincts about people who might harm his wife. He went into a panic, especially since you lived in her grandmother’s house, Nana. Then Nana came to me in a dream, she does that all the time, and told me who Chloe was.”

“Does she have short red hair and laughing eyes?”

“Yes, that is Nana. Has she been to you?”

“Well, I dreamt of a woman called Nana.”

Derek was still trying to figure this out and asked many questions. George and Rowena did the best they could to answer their questions without reference to anything that would scare them. They said nothing about white tigers and talking butterflies.

“But, if Felicia was trying to harm your family, why do you want to help Chloe, who is basically the enemy?”

“Because, my boy, like us and our children, you had nothing to do with it. We have all been victims, really. We have been through a difficult time over this and we would not want others to suffer the same. Also, the spell is broken by the power of love. Part of that love is forgiving ‘the enemy’ as you call it. We have no problem with Chloe. She is as hard-done by this as we have been. In a way our motives are also selfish. Your happiness assures us that it is finally over for us and our daughter. You see, she got married this weekend and we don’t want anything to go wrong.”

Derek was silent now. Whatever he might say, he knew they were kind and caring. He knew that they were telling him the truth. There was no malice in their demeanor and there had never been. He looked at Chloe and saw how distraught she was.

“I think we will leave now. Thank you for sharing that with us. Chloe and I need to work through this. Thank you.”

When they left, George said.

“The girl has known all along.”

“Yes, she just did not want to believe. We’ll have to wait and see.”

Chloe and Derek walked back to the house in stunned silence. When they sat down inside, Derek asked.

“So, what do you think? Look. I would not believe any of that stuff normally, but I must tell you, those are good people....”

“I know, Derek, I know. My mother told me about the Curse of the Darkness. She used to cry about it. You see, they could do nothing about it. It depended on Portia’s family. My mother tried to find them, but their surnames had changed so many times with marriage, that we never managed to trace them. Each of them had one daughter, who somehow, got married and lived happily. My mother always said that the spell turned on us, because they got married and we got left.”

Chloe was crying.

“I never believed her. I blamed her for my father leaving and almost hated her for it. Oh Derek, she tried so many times to explain and each time she told me, I got angrier and she stopped talking about it. I wish she was here now. I wish I could tell her so many things.”

Derek was holding her as she cried. This was so unreal, but if that was what made sense right now, so be it.

When she stopped crying, she said.

“Derek, I have been awful to you when you said you couldn’t explain it made me so angry, because it sounded like what my mother had said. I’m sorry.”

“Oh Chloe, I am the only one who needs to be sorry. I was a pig and a terrible husband. I should have been stronger. But darling, those people are right. Our love must include forgiveness. Will you ever forgive me, Chloe?”

“Perhaps, it depends on how well you try to make it up to me,” her eyes sparkled at him.

Derek looked into the sky and thought, *thank you, Nana, whoever you are.*

*Nana was smiling. At last, these two have got it together. She felt tired now, because it had been hard work to get Derek to get out of bed to go to his wife. Also, Chloe had been*

*so stubborn. The dreams did very little to push her to her husband. Well, it is okay now.*

*The balance is restored. The power of love has finally succeeded.*

*There was nothing left for her to do now. The Curse of the Darkness was finally broken.*

*What would she do now? Perhaps, tomorrow, she would pay Jono a visit, just for a good laugh. But later, she would go and deal with that Brad Adcock and get him to finally get a handle on his red girl.*

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### About the Author

Senna Fisher is a romantic fiction writer from Durban, South Africa. She has an affinity to things magical and spiritual matters. She is also interested in the power dynamics between women and men in a modern society. She loves to observe the world in nature and its connection to human experiences.

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*Book 1: Against the Odds*

*Book 2: Always at Odds* available at Smashwords

<https://www.smashwords.com/books/view/351744>

*Book 3: Cheating the Odds* available at Smashwords

<https://www.smashwords.com/books/view/351745>

### Excerpt: Book 2: Always at Odds

Brad watched her as she walked into the room. Her dress was tight and passionate against her body, hugging her snugly like a desperate lover. He liked the way she swayed slightly with her hips moving in rhythm with her legs. Her legs were bare and her thin strappy sandals looked like they could barely hold her feet. Her black dress was everything he imagined 'a little black dress' to be and she was everything he imagined the owner of the dress to be, except her hair. It was wild and curly and seemed to have gone on a raid on her head. Large curls moved in chaotic disarray on her head and the curls moved in an uncoordinated fashion around her shoulders. Her hair was a bright red, the color of her lipstick. He looked at her breasts, so warmly relaxed against her chest and he wished he could lay his head there. She walked confidently across the room, apparently unaware to the curious stares of the men in the room. She stopped when she saw Jeremy Krause, the

host of the party. He was at least 80 years old and he turned slowly to her. His weathered face lit up when he saw her and he embraced her and kissed her cheeks. She whispered something to him and they both laughed. She threw her head back and her defiant curls did a wild dance on her shoulders.

Brad tried to reign in the horny thoughts that flew through his mind. He had a flash of her hair bouncing wildly in rhythm with her breasts as she straddled him. He could not take his eyes off her back and watched the way she leaned forward to shake hands with Jeremy's friends. Jeremy wondered off to get her a drink at the bar and Brad noticed how she shifted from one leg to another impatiently as she made conversation. *Good, she is a little bored. I think I can do something about that.* He forced his eyes off her and decided to join Jeremy.

Jeremy was standing at the bar, ordering a glass of white wine for her.

"Bradford, how are you? I didn't realize you had already arrived. How is your dear mother?"

"Hello Jeremy. I am fine and so is my mother. She sends her regards. She asked me to tell you that she is so sorry she could not attend today, but that she will make it up to you later."

"Good, good. I am so pleased that you made time to be here. I know how you young people hate attending these book launches. Thank you, my boy."

"Sure, no problem. I am always happy to be here."

"Who did you come with, the usual crowd of young lions?"

Brad laughed.

"Yes, I am afraid. We have plans later, so I dragged all my friends here. Mother said she was not sure there would a large attendance, because the book is so unusual. So I thought I would bring the boys. Is it alright?"

"Yes, of course. I am pleased that you tried to help. But as you can see, things look pretty good. I had better get back to my special guest. An old family friend."

"Alright. I will speak to you later."

"I would like to introduce you to her. Perhaps you lads can take her out later. She is visiting her father, a friend of mine. He is not well, so she has come to see him. You know John Spencer?"

"Oh yes, I know him. He is a friend of my mother. But I don't think I met the daughter. Where is she?"

“She is standing over there with the black dress. That is Colwyn Spencer.” He indicated with a nod.

“Oh yes, she is very exotic, isn’t she?”

“I would not describe her in those terms. She is a very sweet young woman who takes life too seriously. She is an architect out there in Oakmore City. She likes the noise and commotion and fancies old buildings. She is exotic, you say?”

“Yes. There is something unusual about her. I noticed when she walked in. She is highly confident.”

“Yes, very much so. She is a loner. She is nothing like her father. Come, let me introduce you now, otherwise she will be stuck with all my old friends for hours, talking about her daddy.”

Bradford smiled in satisfaction. *Great stuff.*

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