



The Lure of Song And Magic

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Chapter 1

Hollywood's hottest producer seeks former teen sensation to find kidnapped son.

Dylan Ives Oswin grimaced as he imagined the gossip rag headline. The media would have a field day if they learned why he was parking his Porsche at the Little Angels Childcare Center instead of wheeling and dealing in his L.A. office. That he'd actually traveled out to the rural boonies reflected the extent of his determination—or demented obsession—to track every clue that might lead to Donal.

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He did not like being made a fool, so his sources damned well better be correct. His time was too valuable to waste on hunting a spoiled, temperamental child star with a ridiculous name. If Syrene wasn't inside this cement-block building, heads would roll.

He'd left civilization behind over an hour ago. He was far into the coastal mountains now, surrounded by trees and shrubs tough enough to survive the arid conditions. A few miles farther east, on the far side of the mountain range, it would be real desert, but the town of El Padre was only halfway there. Why the devil would a former star rolling in dough live here?

Shivering in the chilly March wind as he climbed from the car, he concentrated on the tasks left undone back in his office rather than his current insanity. He had to finalize the Nathan contract that would keep his lease paid for the next year. He had a hot date tonight who might object to a threesome with his accountant if he had to stay late going over the numbers.

Right this minute, walking up to the door in the mountain-clear sunshine, with hope pounding at the locked doors of his heart, none of that mattered. Finding Donal was more important than an office or a date. The desperation gnawing at his gut would not allow him to ignore any clue, even the most freakish, even after all this time.

Clearly visible from these hills, the brown smog of L.A. covered the coastline for as far as the eye could see. Up here above the palm trees, dirty snow from a freak spring storm still muddied the parking lot. The drive had taken him from the luxury of his high-rise Santa Monica office to rural oblivion. If he was on a wild goose chase, it was his own damned fault.

His cell phone rang as he reached for the doorknob. Feeling antsy about his bizarre quest, he was almost relieved to flick the familiar headset back to reality. "Oz," he answered curtly.

"No is not an acceptable answer," he told his assistant after listening to his question. "If they want to play hardball, we can, too. Call the network and tell them I'll pull all my clients if that's the way they want it. Send my calls to Carter until I get back, will you? I'm busy."

He took off the headset, tucked it into his pocket, and shoved open the day care door. His quarry was either here or she wasn't. If she was here, he'd figure out what to do

about her then.

Oz strode in expecting to enter a sterile foyer similar to the one where he'd occasionally taken his son on the nanny's day off. Instead of encountering a private reception desk and a locked wall preventing access to the children, he nearly stumbled over a munchkin dashing across his Italian loafers.

Before he could retreat, a cacophonous chaos of swirling children struck him—children the age Donal would be if he were still alive somewhere. The exuberance of childish energy shot a spear of agony straight to Oz's tormented soul.

He was six-four, weighed in at one-ninety—mostly muscle—and he'd faced hostile boardrooms and raging paparazzi with cool aplomb. Two dozen tiny toddlers stripped him bare, revealing the gaping abyss left by his son's absence.

Oz clutched the doorknob until the worst of the pain subsided, and his mind kicked in. Had the email from the mysterious *Librarian* led him here for a reason? Could Donal be here? He'd endure any amount of agony to find out.

Letting the door close, Oz suppressed all hope but narrowed his eyes and scanned the children. Would he even recognize his son after a year? Kids changed so fast...

But Donal's coloring was like his own—unusual. The boy's hair was lighter than Oz's golden brown, but his eyes were just as dark, more black than brown. The room teemed with dark-haired, dark-eyed children of Hispanic descent, combined with a number of fair-haired, blue-eyed Anglos. The only redhead in the room was a spiky-haired teenager in a far corner, reading a book to a circle of enrapt toddlers who swayed and sang when she showed them the illustrations.

A dumpy woman in a pink polyester pant suit from the dark ages—or Goodwill—rose from a low table occupied by shouting, water-coloring children. Ignoring this evident figure of authority, Oz scanned the room again, this time in search of the woman he'd been told he'd find here. The teenager appeared to be the next oldest occupant. Her small audience was jumping up and down, blocking him from more than a glimpse of short red hair.

The person he sought was famous for her angelic, long, silver-blond hair.

"May I help you?" the older woman asked as she approached. She looked harried and annoyed at his intrusion. She wore a Little Angels name tag with Bertha engraved

upon it, and she was much too old to be the object of his search. Crazy as they were, Oz didn't want his sources to be wrong.

"I was told I might find Philippa..." He hesitated, trying to remember which way the fool female's names went. Her full name was Philippa Seraphina Malcolm James Henderson. The former rock star had used just one name—Syrene—but she had signed her contracts as Seraphina Malcolm. His private investigator had said the teen singer's former name wasn't known here, that she'd taken her other names when she'd dropped out of sight. "James," he concluded.

"Pippa? Who's asking?" Bertha asked in suspicion, presumably because he hadn't known the nickname.

"I apologize for not introducing myself, Bertha." Recovering, Oz smoothly offered his business card and a practiced smile. "Dylan Oswin. I produce children's television shows. I believe Miss James might be interested in my proposal."

"Television? Oh dear." Bertha looked even more flustered and glanced over her shoulder—at the redheaded teenager flinging colorful confetti over the heads of her laughing audience.

Philippa Seraphina Malcolm James—Henderson was her late husband's name—should be almost twenty-seven by Oz's calculations. She had gained fame as a teenage singing sensation before she was twelve. And when she'd retired that life—a polite euphemism for crashing and burning in a fiery media frenzy—she'd apparently developed another career writing and illustrating children's books. *Writer* did not equate with *teenager*.

If the redhead was called Philippa James, she could not be the woman he sought, and disappointment once again tore open his aching wounds. Conan had found the wrong woman.

While Bertha dithered, waiting for the reading session to end, Oz eased closer to study the only other semi-adult in the room. From this angle, he could see that a purple streak accented the reader's spiky red hair. She'd painted a sparkling silver ziz-zag of a tear down one cheek. Enormous blue denim coveralls concealed most of her hot pink tank top. Silver glitter sparkled on her bare shoulders, and her fingernails appeared to be kaleidoscopic swirls of color.

Nine years ago, Oz had been busy building his client list, and Syrene had been much too young to come under his radar. Her pictures had been everywhere, though. The child singing sensation had worn her platinum blond hair silky straight and down to her waist. Her image had been as squeaky clean as her music, appealing to the middle school set.

The kid in the corner was a psychedelic freak in no way resembling the angelic image of the child singer.

Of course, nine years ago, the teenage idol had metamorphosed into a belligerent wrecking ball, heedlessly destroying lives with her tantrums. Oz had driven up here expecting a rude, obnoxious prima donna. Recognizing—and dealing with—talent was his business, after all.

Preparing to confront a total stranger about his son's disappearance was a tougher task. He had no idea how she might be involved. The mysterious email had simply said, "Syren can find yr son." He didn't even know if Syren and Syrene were one and the same, much less know whether she was kidnapper or salvation.

This red-headed clown appeared to be neither, and his hopes sank, but he hadn't come here unprepared. Back in reality land, when Conan had told him Syrene was now an author, Oz had been struck with the concept of doing a series based on the work of the author Philippa James. It would be a damned good commercial idea. And if she really was Syrene, dealing with her over books might offer some clue as to how she could help him find Donal.

Well, at least he had a good cover for talking to the demented leprechaun.

As the redhead closed the book and the toddlers tumbled and laughed at some last instruction, Bertha abandoned him in the doorway. She crossed the room, stopping to wipe runny noses and accept grimy hugs in her progress.

Oz couldn't remember the last time he'd hugged Donal. He'd usually arrived home after the kid was asleep. Had he hugged him that last weekend before the boy had disappeared? He hoped so.

That he didn't deserve to be a father had crossed his mind often. But not knowing what Donal suffered kept Oz doggedly following every clue.

The spike-haired reader unfolded from the floor, revealing a surprisingly tall,

slender figure that moved with a poise free of adolescent awkwardness. Oz revised her age upward.

He tried to compare Syrene's Alice-in-Wonderland looks to this bizarre redhead, but the images didn't compute. He'd fire his private investigator for sending him after the wrong woman, except Conan was his brother. *Damn.*

The redhead didn't look at him but vigorously shook her head at something Bertha was saying. Anticipating a bolt, Oz eased around the perimeter, posting himself between the two exits. People generally came to him, but he'd been known to hunt his prey when necessary.

She glanced in his direction, seemed to shrink backward, but, acknowledging his proximity, straightened her spine.

Oz kept one hand in his pants pocket, adopting a casual, non-threatening stance to lure her in. He couldn't pull off the oh-gosh-shucks farm boy look while wearing his usual uniform of a black silk polo and Prada blazer, but he beamed an encouraging smile, concealing the predatory white flash of teeth for which he was known in certain circles.

Lifting a weeping child wearing a pink pinafore, using her as a shield, the redhead approached.

"Mr. Oswin," she said questioningly, wiping at the child's tears with her colorfully painted fingernails and tickling her into giggles.

"Oz, please," he responded automatically. "Pippa James?"

She nodded, kissed the toddler's ruddy cheek, and returned her to the floor. Oz assumed he'd passed some test if she dropped her first line of defense. He was good at reading body language. His career depended on it.

"I have an agent," she informed him. "If you want to talk business, you should have called him. My editor would have given you his name."

She actually had an agent? *This* was really Syrene? If Conan was right about the child star becoming a book author, it would seem so. Oz hastily modified his preconceived notions.

Her voice was perfectly modulated, without emotion. It didn't suit her images, past, present, or otherwise. The child singer had exuded passion in every piercingly crystalline note. Even adults had wept at the teenage angst poured from the soul. Her love

songs had silenced screaming crowds to devoted tears. *Magical* had been the most used description of her performances.

Despite her impassive tone, the woman behind the clown disguise radiated a feminine energy that sucked him in. He could understand why she'd been a star. She had *presence*, even in torn denim and silver tears. And she was definitely not a teenager but a woman with jaded experience in her startlingly turquoise-blue eyes. Were those contacts?

"You're part of the package, Miss James. We would have to work together, so I needed to meet you before I made any offers." That part, he'd memorized. From here on, he had to improvise based on her reaction.

He had hoped that if she recognized his name and knew his son's kidnapper, he would see fear in her eyes. Donal's disappearance had been headline news for months.

She merely gazed at him with impassivity. "We can't work together," she asserted. "So if that's your concern, you may return to your office and write off the project. I don't need the money." She turned away.

Oz caught her elbow, meaning only to slow her down.

Without warning, she spun around, slicing the edge of her hand across his inner arm, a blow that might have broken bones had he held her tighter.

He rubbed the bruise as she stalked off with long-legged assurance, not even bothering to run.

He guessed that was a no.

His reputation for not taking no for an answer was legendary, for good reason.

Pippa took the well-worn dirt path behind the day care to her stucco cottage, fighting the tremors that hit as soon as she allowed herself to think. There were reasons she'd trained to act first and ask questions later.

But her training hadn't been necessary for so long that she'd hoped and prayed the world had forgotten her. Her books weren't Harry Potter bestsellers, just pleasant tales to amuse her and a legion of toddlers.

The stranger had called her by her author name. Did she dare hope he didn't know the other?

Pushing open the rusting wrought iron gate to her walled courtyard, she steadied

her ragged nerves with a rush of pleasure and relief. Her home was her sanctuary.

Now that she could breathe again, she realized she shouldn't have hurt the man, not because he didn't deserve it but because sharks could be vicious. Prada and silk couldn't disguise the muscled grace of a predator. Despite Oswin's deceptive sheep's pose, she recognized a wolf when she saw one.

She was mixing metaphors. Closing the gate, she sank down on a wide timber bench and breathed deeply, inhaling the calming pine and sage scents of her garden. Curling her legs into a lotus pose, turning her palms upward on her knees, Pippa hummed her mantra until she calmed the raging tide of fear that threatened her whenever the outside world invaded.

This was her life now. Even constricted as it was, it was a far happier place than she'd ever been.

The rusty squeak of the gate shattered her tranquility. She jumped to her feet, clenching her fists as *Oz* entered. The ridiculous nickname didn't suit him. He ought to look like a wizard, not a lawyer.

At five eight, she was tall. He was nearly a head taller, broad-shouldered, and muscled as she was not. The blazer concealed his physical strength in sleek lines, but in years of martial arts training, she'd learned to recognize muscular prowess.

She could take him, but it wouldn't be pretty. And she had to admit, his golden surfer boy looks were disarming—if she ignored the determination behind his deceptive smile. She did so at her own risk.

She had every right to protect herself against the way of life that had destroyed her. And he was blatantly part of that destructive existence. Keeping her anger and fear tightly leashed, as she'd learned to do through harsh experience, she warned, "You're trespassing."

"I do that occasionally," he admitted with seductive charm. "My brothers have tried to beat the habit out of me, but so far, they've not succeeded."

He had brothers. There was more than one of him. *Heaven forbid*. Accepting that he was human and not the monster in her mind, Pippa sat down abruptly and resumed her position. He couldn't seduce her with empty promises if she didn't listen.

"I'll admit, you're not what I expected," he said thoughtfully.

In overalls, wearing her Dorabelle clown face, she knew what she looked like to a snotty L.A. producer. She considered chucking a loose paver at his head, until he spoke again.

“You’re better, far more than I imagined.”

Perversely, now that the insult had turned into the same old song and dance, she still wanted to chuck a brick.

“Because sharks don’t have imaginations,” she said dryly, forgetting her intention of ignoring him. She’d more easily ignore a prowling lion. He paced her courtyard, examining everything from the nearly bare jacaranda falling over the wall to the budding rosebushes protected by warm stucco and the garden gnome hiding behind the thorns.

And her. She knew when she was being checked out. She sat still in her bibbed denim, giving him no satisfaction, although her neglected libido trembled in expectation.

“I have enough imagination to know a market phenomenon when I see one,” he said with amazing arrogance. “Admittedly, I’m not in the business of multi-billion-dollar projects where a single meltdown could bankrupt me. I have employees who rely on their salaries, and I’m averse to unnecessary risk for their sakes. Instead, I’ve learned to recognize the smaller, sure-fire projects. What I have in mind for you is almost pure profit with little effort.”

Pippa closed her eyes so she didn’t have to see his winning smile. She tried to find the focus inside her head, but his pacing disturbed the walled garden’s tranquility. And hers.

“Talk to my agent about my books,” she repeated. “I am not and never will be part of the package. There are plenty of starving actors who will work for peanuts.”

“Possibly,” he agreed, humoring her. “But I need you to approve the input. It’s your style and charm that make the books successful. I’ll need that to shine through in the show.”

“No,” she said firmly. “Please leave.” She was afraid if he lingered, that the Voice, the Evil, the Bane of her Existence would break through her resolve. Mr. Producer would end up crawling on his knees, which was much too tempting a scenario and the reason she hid from civilization. She’d sworn never to use that curse again, but she was weak and the temptation to lash out and defend herself was strong.

Instead of leaving, he came dangerously close, close enough for her to smell the expensive aftershave that blended with his sexy male musk.

“I know who you are,” he said silkily.

The threat untethered the last fragile bond of her restraint.

Furious as she was fearful, Pippa lashed out with her foot. Her heel would have rendered him incapable of procreating except this time he’d expected the assault and dodged with the quick reflexes of a trained athlete. Her sandal merely slammed high above his crotch.

Undaunted, she brought both feet to the ground and, using the momentum of her motion, rose from a half crouch to jab the heel of her hand beneath his chin and snap his head back.

Despite his bruised groin, Oz grabbed her wrist and bent it backward before she could break his neck.

“We need to talk, *Syrene*.”

She ripped her arm free of his grasp. Holding her ears, unable to fight the Voice any longer, Pippa collapsed on the ground, rolling into a human shield. Deep beneath the screaming banshee she became at times like this, her soul howled at the injustice of being exposed after she’d finally found peace.