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MAGIC
Series

AZURE SECRETS

A chef who brews magic challenges
a mayor with secrets

New York Times Bestselling Author

PATRICIA RICE

AZURE SECRETS SAMPLE

CRYSTAL MAGIC, BOOK 5



PATRICIA RICE



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To Purchase Azure Secrets

Azure Secrets
Patricia Rice

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ONE



Tuesday, after midnight

Fury had taken her halfway up the mountain, straight into a cold drizzle. Desperation forced her on.

The March mist turned into fat drops. The oil slick black line of highway threatened to spill her and her bike over the closest cliff.

If she couldn't make this one last chance work, she might as well ride off that cliff.

Pumping the bike pedals from anger into exhaustion, Fiona pushed her endurance. She'd passed the sign that read HILLVALE SPIRITUAL HOME OF 325 LIVES AND COUNTLESS GHOSTS. How much farther could it be?

She remembered the sign from a dozen years ago or more. She didn't remember the distance into town, but knowledge that she was close kept her motivated. She didn't want to disappoint Peggy.

"Never again, Sukey," she told the miniature Yorkie mix in her bike basket. "Never again will we have to serve rotten fish. You and me, we're going to be free." And safe from the low-life scum who'd made her life hell recently.

Please let Hillvale be safe—and accepting. And more understanding than human nature allowed.

Sukey yapped agreement. The perky scarf some dog groomer had tied around the mutt's neck had almost come undone under rough handling, but with her silky hair blowing in the spring breeze, Sukey seemed unfazed by her ordeal. Her Pekingese curl of a tail wagged happily.

Dawn wasn't ready to break yet on this west side of the Santa Cruz mountains. The dead battery in Fiona's ancient bike light left visibility near zero.

"We just need a place to crash, kid," she told the dog. "The town was full of empty old cabins last time I was here. Who will care if we hole up in one for a while?"

Of course, the last time she'd been here had been when she was around twelve, but that was one of those things she didn't think about—especially in the rain.

"I can't rely on Peggy to do more than introduce me," she told the dog, who tried to lick her hand in sympathy.

Finally, she saw lights. Not many. That pinpoint way ahead in the distance might be a street lamp indicating civilization was not too far off. The closer ones behind trees and bushes might be night lights in occupied homes.

Street savvy, she knew how to locate shelter. She remembered poking around the abandoned cabins along this strip of road as a child. Discovering whether another vagrant like her had claimed them was more difficult. She hoped in this tourist resort there wouldn't be as many homeless and druggies as down by the beach.

She got off the bike and walked it, looking for a weed-strewn drive, finding one almost immediately. It was perilously close to one of the houses with lights on, but the rain was coming down harder. Maybe she could just take shelter under a porch roof until it stopped. Exhaustion was winning.

Bushes grew across the drive, so she knew no vehicle had

used it in recent memory. The overgrowth was so bad, she almost didn't see the cabin until she pushed past a cluster of damp bushes. The porch roof had collapsed in splinters of rotten wood, but the steps appeared to be stone. Sukey leaped from her basket to take a wee before Fiona could lift her out.

Unhooking her backpack and bedroll, she climbed the stairs to inspect the damage. The porch appeared to be the same stone as the stairs. Sukey ran across it to the sagging front door, slipping through a crack formed by the buckled wood. Fiona hoped the Yorkie was a good mouser.

Dropping her few possessions, she tentatively tested the door. The panel had sagged off its hinges, making the lock moot. She lifted it aside. She might be small, but she'd lifted heavier weights.

The dog wasn't yapping. She heard no one complaining about being licked to death. She rummaged for the small flashlight her roomie had given her for Christmas. It still functioned, although the beam was narrow. The floor looked solid. This was California, after all. It seldom rained—except when she didn't need it to. Termites were the biggest problem.

The kitchen sink actually had a pump. Who the feck still used pumps? She worked it, priming it with water from her bottle as she'd been taught when she was a kid living in camps. Rusty water eventually poured into a metal basin. She could probably wash in it after it ran a while. Cool.

The front room and kitchen were all one room. She checked the back door. It was in better shape. She unlocked the knob and stepped onto another stone step. What looked like a tool shed sagged in dilapidation on the other side of the weed-strewn yard. She wouldn't test it in this rain, but she bet it was an outhouse. Hillvale apparently wasn't big on zoning.

Tickled that she had a dry roof over her head and water to

wash in, she checked the two empty bedrooms. Someone had left the house stripped bare, but the windows were whole. She just needed to bar the front door, and she was in pretty good shape if she needed shelter for more than one night. Too tired to tackle the task now, she rolled out her sleeping bag and whistled for Sukey. The dog ran up, licked her face, and settled into the bag with her.

She'd never had a pet before. She didn't know how she'd feed this one. But she figured she was one-thousand percent better than whoever Sukey's former owner was.

Fiona Malcolm McDonald, dog thief. She'd start her new life of crime in the morning.



Stripped to the waist and shaving, Monty heard the front door of his cottage open. His mother had done it again—had a key made. Kurt had warned him.

It was time to move out.

Monty had been putting off the decision, thinking he ought to look for a job far, far away from Hillvale. But what other town would take in a has-been football player with a city management degree and only Hillvale on his resume? Not any town he wanted to live in.

He could see his mother's reflection in the mirror. Carmel Kennedy always looked as if she'd stepped off a fashion runway, even at seven in the morning. He ran his razor over his neck, ignoring her. He checked out his chest—he needed to get back to weight-lifting or he'd start sagging like an old man. But his quarterback shoulders were still there. Maybe he could take up lifting boxes as a profession—Monty, the Moving Man.

“It's time you exerted your authority around here,

Montgomery,” his mother announced. “You are mayor, after all. You can put a stop to this commune museum nonsense. We need real businesses and housing, not a memorial to a bunch of drugged-up hippies.”

His mother lived in a fantasy world where money happened and snapping her fingers compelled people to jump. Maybe, if he’d taken that NFL offer—but that was ten years ago. Now he had to live with his choice—number crunching that made his head hurt as much as the concussions he used to suffer. Karma sucked.

Monty washed off the shaving cream and reached for his shirt without replying. She had no business in his private domain. He’d made that clear multiple times. Kurt claimed that their mother sucked the air out of the room. Half the town—the weird Lucy half—claimed Carmel was an emotional vampire.

If he believed either possible, he would agree.

As mayor, he felt obligated to wear real shirts and not tank tops or hoodies, but he drew the line at ties. His neck was too thick, and ties strangled him. He ran his fingers through his long hair to comb it out of his face, but he hadn’t had it styled in months. It only fell back down again.

He pushed past his mother, located a protein drink in the refrigerator, and left her nagging as he strolled out and slid into the BMW sedan that suited his size and position better than a low-slung sports car like his brother’s. He probably ought to jog down the hill to his office, but he didn’t like starting the day sweaty. And today, it was drizzling. Glancing up the burned-out mountain, he prayed for more rain, but not too much. Mudslides were a very real possibility until the undergrowth returned.

He didn’t own his cottage outright. It belonged to the family corporation, like the rest of the resort and half of Hillvale. The position of mayor paid next to nothing, and the corporation had

had too many setbacks to pay much of a salary these days. He'd have to locate a rental property far from the resort, one his mother couldn't just walk into as if he were still twelve years old. Now that tourists were showing more of an interest in Hillvale, the once-empty cabins were starting to fill. In fairness, he'd have to reimburse the family coffers for the rent on any other place he took.

Wouldn't his old pals at Stanford laugh at him now! Scowling, he pulled the BMW into the town lot. His niece and the other Lucys had asked to turn the wide City Hall driveway into a park, one that led to a stairway up to the farmland they were developing. He missed his private parking space, but he had to admit, the small park was nice. Gravel walk, handmade wooden benches, and flowering shrubs he couldn't identify provided a square of tranquility. Still, he tried to stay out of their mad scheme to create a completely impractical history museum and art school on the land above the park.

A russet-haired dog with a curled tail and short legs ran across the brightly-lit empty parking lot to yap at him. Hillvale didn't have leash laws, but he hoped the owner was around. Traffic would pick up shortly.

"I don't need to be in my office yet," he told the creature, snapping his fingers to see if it would follow him to safety. It crossed the road and grinned up at him, panting happily. "I just left to escape the nagging. How about you?"

The boardwalk roof prevented him from getting too wet as he strolled, assessing his domain. At this hour, almost everything was closed and dark. Because of the Lucys, Hillvale businesses leaned toward the weird side. They had a tarot and crystal shop, a thrift store—currently with steampunk mannequins in the window—and an antique store with crystal chandeliers that didn't exactly suit rustic cabins.

What they needed were a hardware and drugstore and a health food juice bar. If he could take a pill to replace cooking, he would. He thought maybe he'd almost talked Dinah into retiring the café so he could have the juice bar.

"I can't even buy you a dog biscuit," he told the mutt.

In the early spring morning darkness, a pack of spandex-attired bicyclists raced down the highway from the lodge. "Maybe I should take up biking," he mused aloud. The dog yapped agreement.

Monty debated crossing the street to Dinah's café. He didn't eat eggs or greasy meat, but that was the town gathering place, and he craved company. Maybe the cook would finally admit the café was too much for her and agree to just handling the dinner restaurant next door. He wanted better choices than hamburgers and pies. It was damned hard staying in shape sitting at a desk.

A tourist lingered in front of the café's plate glass window. In the dim light, she appeared to be a slip of a thing, all alone, wearing a hoodie and colorful yoga pants that nicely outlined a well-rounded ass. A baseball cap hid her hair. "Whaddaya say, mutt, shall we check her out?"

In reply, the dog yapped and raced across the street and parking lot to jump on the tourist, who picked it up and scolded it. The dog didn't look too unhappy about the scolding.

Not being a mindless dog, Monty checked both ways before crossing the street, thus avoiding walking into Peggy on her ancient bike. The skinny social worker must have family with a little money to allow her to spend weekends at his family's luxury Redwood Resort. She certainly wasn't their usual designer-clothed resident.

Peggy waved at him and continued on without noticing the tourist, who'd turned to watch her bike past.

A red Jag F-type coupe approached from the direction of the

resort. To Monty's disgust, the freaking driver hit the gas as he sped through town, splashing through puddles. Monty stepped back on the boardwalk.

A dull thud, the scrape of metal on metal was followed by a high-pitched scream that pierced every cell in his body.

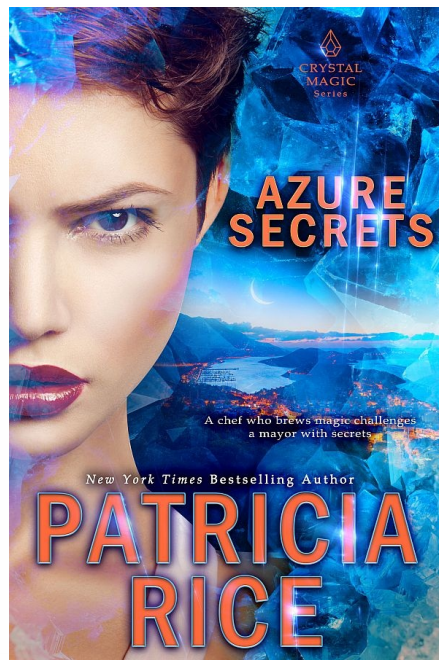
Heart stopping, he checked to see if the mutt was okay. Sobbing, the girl was clinging to the dog and watching the Jag. Monty swung to watch the sports car speed down the highway out of town. It was gone in a squeal of tires.

In the Jag's path lay Peggy, crumpled and broken, her bike still spinning its front wheel.

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Crystal Magic #4



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