



CRYSTAL
MAGIC
Series

AMBER AFFAIRS

She sees the future, he lives in the past,
danger is in the present

New York Times Bestselling Author

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AMBER AFFAIRS SAMPLE

CRYSTAL MAGIC, BOOK 6



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ONE



“YOU WANT TO GET MARRIED IN SLEEPING BEAUTY’S SHRINE?” JOSH Gabriel asked. He gazed incredulously at the impossible jungle tumbling into one of California’s normally arid canyons.

Blonde and willowy beneath her safari shirt and shorts, his fiancée continued snapping photos. “Stand over there so I can show the height of that bougainvillea,” Willa ordered.

As a Hollywood fantasy director, Josh appreciated the setting. He almost imagined a blond, spike-haired sprite peering from beneath a rose bush until he realized he was conjuring a face from a past best forgotten. His childhood had been as abnormal as this greenery. He ought to grow up and forget it. Except he had fond memories of chasing dragons and trolls through a Hollywood-landscape, wooden sword in hand. He meant to recreate those days of innocence in this next film. He was damned tired of violent superheroes and exploding buildings.

Which was why he was standing here now with Willa Powell, the queen of coins, who shared his dream—or the financial end of it anyway. He’d been dazzled by her beauty when they first met, terrified by her ambition when she agreed to take on his project. But their goals had clicked, and over the past months working together, they had realized they had more than a film in common.

“Shouldn’t there be a glass casket or a few dwarves down there instead of rocks, or at least a bubbling spring of nubile nymphs?” he asked, relishing his fantasy.

“The camellia is still blooming! This is perfect,” Willa crowed, snapping more pics.

“A cauldron and witches, maybe,” Josh mused, standing where ordered but still studying the famed vortex below that had apparently made this hick town a destination wedding site. “You realize our guests will have to sit on rocks? I can’t see your father agreeing to that.”

“They have stadium cushions.” Willa was a producer, but she had developed directorial tendencies with this wedding business. “Look at the roses! I’ll have to use them in my bouquet.”

“And of course, you won’t be sitting in the dirt,” Josh said, amused despite himself. His fiancée had a very Germanic need for order she’d inherited from her dictator of a father. Josh was always amazed when she strayed from the beaten path. “I trust you aren’t planning on gliding down the aisle wearing heels, or you’ll need those walking sticks everyone up here carries.” Her heels put her an inch taller than he and were a bit of a sore point.

“Just think of the spread we’ll have in Tinseltown Today. The publicity alone will make your new film.”

Well, yeah, there was that. Willa had a good head for publicity. He shoved his hands in his pockets and tried to picture the logistics of a wedding ceremony in a valley of rocks. But this was Willa’s production, not his. If he were doing this, he’d build a set and add dinosaurs.

Psychologists had told him that he was living the fantasies he’d been denied by his stressed-out, impoverished childhood. Woo-hoo.

“What about me?” he asked. “Do I drop to the altar by helicopter? Swing in like Tarzan? Or do I parade down the aisle

with you?” He rather fancied swinging in like Tarzan, but weddings were supposed to be about the bride, he supposed. His own directorial propensities were showing.

“Hillvale has done this before. I’m sure they have it all worked out. I’ll have Brad take photos of you at the jewelry store when you buy the ring. Theodosia Devine Designs are as divine as her name. I don’t know why she’s hiding up here, but her shop is the first one as you go into town.”

They had an entire crew in Hillvale to plan this wedding stunt, including Brad, Willa’s favorite contract photographer, a wedding planner, Willa’s secretary, assistant, and the vice president of her company. Josh wondered if he should hire his own entourage.

But he had looked at the cost of Devine rings online—only a goddess could afford them. He didn’t have wealthy parents and lived on borrowed money. Up until this production, his films had had modest budgets. Entourages were out of the question, but he really wanted to start out on the right foot by giving Willa the romantic ring she deserved. “How much of this wedding will the publicity budget cover?”

“Quit being such a tightwad. The film will earn it all back and then some.” Accustomed to wealth, Willa shoved aside a straying strand of flaxen hair and turned her telescopic lens on the rock platform below that resembled an altar. “Your credit is good for it.”

“Marrying for my credit line is uncool, my love,” he warned with a laugh.

He returned to picturing the amphitheater filled with trolls and elves watching the witches stir their cauldron. How would all the greenery and hedonistic floral arrangements work with witches and elves? A mating ceremony for a virgin and a powerful shape-shifting dragon, maybe. Damn, that aroused

him. Could he persuade Willa. . . ?

He eyed his fiancée with interest. Tall, too slender for her enhanced breasts, wearing an expensive tangle of golden curls and weaves, Willa would pass for a movie star, except she had too many brains to become one when she had alternatives.

The sex—well, it was good, even if it was tough fitting two Hollywood egos into one bed. They'd work it out. Since Willa's goal was to run her father's production firm, and his was to get rich, drop out, and write books, he figured she considered him a stepping stone to her future. Maybe he was, but for however long their marriage lasted, it would be a good ride.

Besides, he'd tried romance once and failed beyond abysmally. Since he was making some headway with the business side of life, he'd continue down that pragmatic path.

"You have the wedding planner and PR department to work out details," he told her, bored with the photo shoot. He preferred being behind the camera these days, not in front. "I want to go into town and take a look at the ring selection so we're not dithering, then check into entertainment for our guests. I'm guessing we'll do the bachelor parties in the city?"

"Definitely." She gingerly took a few steps down the rocky trail in her five-inch heels. "But the restaurant here has an excellent reputation. We can do the rehearsal dinner there."

"Rehearsal? If It's just you and me, babe, what is there to rehearse? We walk down with our nearest and dearest, get hitched, and an eagle carries us to Narnia."

Okay, that one earned him a gorgon glare and a blast of silence. She continued down the trail. Laughing at Bridezilla, Josh headed the other way in hopes the town with three hundred souls and countless ghosts had a bar.



“AUNT AMBER, PLEASE, YOU HAVE TO TAKE ME IN!” THE BREAKING VOICE of her adolescent nephew pleaded through the phone. “Granny is a monster!”

Holding the receiver on her landline, Amber Abercrombie studied the glittering amber rings on her fingers. Each one represented a battle won in her determination to be healthy and whole again. The smallest one represented the years it had taken her to lose the pounds to cross the invisible line from obese to just hefty.

She’d bought the biggest piece the day she’d moved to Hillvale and hundreds of miles out of her mother’s life—her mother, the monster to whom Zeke referred.

Amber and her sister had repeated the epithet often enough for the kid to use the term—which made Zeke’s plea all the more poignant. Amethyst had never named his father, so with his mother’s death, he had no one but a monster and an impoverished aunt for family.

“When is school out?” she asked, deliberately not reacting to his emotional entreaty. Abercrombies were known for their emoting abilities, and her nephew wasn’t exempt from the family drama.

“Next week,” he whispered into the phone, as if his grandmother were in the next room, which she probably wasn’t. Crystal Abercrombie liked crowds, wealthy ones, in expensive venues where kids didn’t belong.

The crappy house Crystal actually lived in had never held her mother’s outsized, demanding personality, but good schools were important for Zeke, so it had seemed safe to leave him there.

“I don’t know what you’re picturing, kid. I live in a tiny cottage. Hillvale has no school.” She tried to warn him, hoping he had alternatives he could call on in the larger world of LA.

Even though she had no child-rearing experience, she knew she would be better than her mother, only she was living on rainbows and promises these days. She'd never be able to sell her rings for what they were worth.

"I'll dust and sweep and wash dishes, and you'll never know I'm there," he wheedled. "Please. Granny wants to take me to her friend's movie set next week, and you know what that means."

Amber closed her eyes to the iridescent crystals, beautiful colors, and quiet harmony with which she'd feathered her nest. It had been over fourteen years since she'd abandoned Hollywood, and she still recalled vividly and painfully the torment of being forced into a mold that didn't fit. And she'd been a good actor. Zeke was not.

"She can't make you. You're underage and don't have a union card," she argued, because that's what she did, looked at all sides of the argument.

"She had a friend forge ID and a card," he whispered. "Mama warned me."

And there was the final nail in her coffin. She had promised Amethyst to look after Zeke if anything happened to her. And things always happened to her big sister—because Amethyst had put herself out there the way Amber no longer did.

Zeke's mother had died in a tragic fire in an unregulated warehouse rock concert last year.

Amber hated fighting. She had hoped she'd never have to go into battle again. But for Zeke, she'd gear up and wield whatever feeble weapon came to hand.

Zeke was hundreds of miles away, and she didn't drive. Problem Number One.

"Then I'm glad you called, Zeke. That was extremely smart of you. Decide what you want to bring, but it can't take up more

than two bags. I'll arrange transportation as soon as the school year ends. We'll figure something out together.”

She smiled at Zeke's youthful shriek of joy and gratitude, while her stomach knotted in the old familiar patterns of her youth as she hung up.

How would she feed and clothe a growing teen? He could sleep on the futon in the spare room, but even she knew the kid wouldn't want to spend his summer dusting crystal balls. Recalling her own adolescence, she knew teens were large, demanding babies who required an enormous investment in time and money. She loved Zeke and she would protect him with her life, but. . .

She'd have to leave her comfortable nest in Hillvale, venture into the cruel world she'd left behind. She was stronger now, but returning to her former reality was impossible. She'd thrown away her crown of fame, fortune, and beauty for a life of anonymity, poverty, and health—mental and physical.

She might never overcome the humiliation and shame that had sunk into her marrow and lived in her nightmares. Consequently, she'd never be able to return to the only work she knew unless she lost her multiple chins.

Unfortunately, losing weight was a losing proposition for her. She'd had years of counseling to accept that which could not be changed.

But she rebelled at leaving Zeke unprotected, disillusioned, and all alone—as she had been.

She loved her little shop with its rainbow colors, lush velvets, and delicate laces. She'd created the scented candles with her own hands. Men weren't much prone to consulting psychics, so her shop was as feminine as she was.

Zeke would hate it. He'd been little more than a toddler when he'd been here last. He was probably remembering the lodge's

ponies, not the dusty highway and half-empty town.

But now that her sister was gone, Amber couldn't abandon Zeke to the monster who had raised them. She'd hoped, since Zeke was male, that Crystal would let him be. Goes to show how little she grasped her mother's ambition, even after years of counseling.

Maybe she could sue the crazy old bat if she got custody of Zeke.

The bell over her shop door chimed, and she pulled herself from her pillowed nest, just in case it was a customer.

The flash from the past crossing her portal hit her with the force of a physical punch. Despite the years since she'd seen him last, she'd recognize those sharp cheekbones, that square jaw, and ever-curious cobalt eyes anywhere. Josh.

Oh filth, damn, crap, and dragon juice. What had she done to deserve a day like this? Why didn't Fate just smite her with a mighty hammer?

While he blinked to accustom his eyes to the dim interior, Amber surreptitiously studied her former colleague. He'd filled out nicely from the eighteen-year-old she last remembered. Despite his years of childish determination, Josh hadn't reached six feet, but he seemed taller than she recalled. His shoulders had developed muscle, and his chest—that was pretty danged spectacular from what she could see under the stylish gray blazer. He'd kept up his workouts, as she hadn't.

"May I help you?" she asked, because an Abercrombie seldom had the sense to flee. Instead, she waited to see if the Jacko she'd once loved had survived and thrived or become another pestilence on the face of the earth.

Josh swung away from snapping a photo of her army of crystal fairies. Of all the men in the universe, creative Josh Gabriel was the only one who might admire her collection.

“Sorry, didn’t see you there. Interesting shop.” He stepped closer to the counter.

She dropped back into the shadows. “Thank you. Are you looking for a gift?”

“I was actually looking for a psychic. We’ve scheduled a Hillvale wedding, and I thought some of the guests might enjoy the entertainment.”

A wedding—Josh was getting married. Of course he was.

She winced as his comment let her know he didn’t recognize her. She didn’t know if that was a disappointment or a relief. “I’m not an entertainer,” she said as pleasantly as she was able. But knowing how desperately she needed extra cash, she added, “I would be happy to make individual appointments for your guests. My card is on the table with the crystal globes.”

He ignored her business cards to examine the globes and take more photos. “I don’t suppose anyone makes sand globes. Maybe with little palm trees inside. We could give them as party favors.”

“Try Florida,” she said, her tongue dry in misery. “You’re looking at hand-blown scrying glasses for those whose gift it is to see beyond the immediate. The crystal in the one you’re holding was found here in Hillvale and processed by one of the best glassmakers in Austria.”

He looked at the price. “Not a party favor,” he agreed. “People actually buy this stuff?”

“Obviously, they haven’t bought that one yet. I’d hoped I could use it myself, but my gift is with the tarot, not crystal.”

Damn. She had to keep flapping her lips, defying fate. Her words must have triggered a memory. He gently put the glass back and turned to face her dark corner. “I knew a girl once. . .” He came closer.

She was an actress. She knew how to don an insouciant mask.

She could even call up a smile to make him think she didn't care in the least who he was or if he remembered her. But she couldn't hide her own shattering heart from herself when his long-lashed cobalt eyes widened and his lips pulled tight—in disgust? Hate?

“Ginger?” he asked in incredulity. “I spent ten years of my life hunting for you and you've been hiding here in plain sight?”

She read people with cards, not body language. But his balled fists and rough voice had to mean intense emotion of some sort. She shivered and defiantly lifted her chin. “Ginger James was a make-believe construct, concocted by my mother and our producer. She never existed.”