



# MOONSTONE SHADOWS



CRYSTAL  
MAGIC  
Series

A librarian searches for healing,  
A felon yearns for forgiveness,  
An enemy stalks them both

*New York Times* Bestselling Author

# PATRICIA RICE





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CRYSTAL MAGIC, BOOK 7



PATRICIA RICE



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**Moonstone Shadows**  
**Patricia Rice**

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## ONE



HEARING LOOK AWAY, LOOK AWAY. . .IN HIS HEAD, AARON IGNORED THE mental admonition and swept his walking stick across the path. The expression whistling Dixie took on another whole level of meaning when roaming Hillvale's haunted hills.

Except Dixieland wasn't the word coming to mind—Fairylane, maybe. Evil land made more sense, even in the original song, he realized sardonically. His subconscious was working overtime.

If he could only find and destroy the source of the evil. . . He'd feel free to abandon this isolated town, maybe travel again, visit his childhood home in the Shetlands.

Except his hand-carved staff had yet to locate any of the new vibrations the women had reported. They were now calling their crystal-knobbed staffs Lucy sticks after a Hollywood fantasy director had referred to them that way. Aaron preferred staff as in "Thy rod and thy staff, they comfort me."

The thick walnut killed snakes too.

Ah, there it was. The stick twitched in his hand, and the crystal eyes of the eagle handle glowed hot against his palm.

He'd done many wrong things in his checkered career. Too much knowledge jaded the mind and blurred the line between right and wrong. It could be that his attempt to right old wrongs

by guarding this mountain was as perverted as the people who initially bled evil into the dirt.

But he could only act on what he knew, and he could feel the evil rising in agitation. The Force had awakened, as his renter, Harvey, had claimed, in his own inimitable way.

The late afternoon shadows were growing longer as Aaron followed the vibrations through the old pines on this shadier side of the mountain. This wasn't old growth by any means. Centuries of native slaves, settlers, farmers, and miners had cleared the original forest—until everyone died, often unpleasantly. The dirt beneath Aaron's feet reeked of centuries of torment—and the evil that had been interred here.

A clearing opened ahead—the consecrated ground of an old church. Spanish missionaries had attempted to establish a mission in the early 1700s, long before the miners and the farmers. Nothing grew on that ground these days but native grasses, brown after a dry summer.

Something disturbed the grasses now—or someone.

In surprise, Aaron halted at the clearing's edge. Although the land was owned by the local resort, even tourists steered clear of this side of the mountain. The darkness was that bad. Could this be the cause of the disturbance?

He'd almost start believing in fairies if the figure sprawled on a blanket in the patch of sunlight wasn't so obviously human. A spill of honey-blond hair fell over her shoulder and a shaggy fringe hid her forehead as she slept on her side. This was August, so she'd apparently shed her hiking gear in the heat and used it as a pillow. Pale ivory skin revealed her unfamiliarity with California's perpetual sunshine. Her incandescent pink t-shirt outlined nice but not large breasts and a too-slender waist.

He'd never seen her before. Sooner or later, every tourist who visited Hillvale traipsed through his antiques store, drawn by the

whimsical and the historical in his display windows. He'd have remembered this visitor.

Look away, look away. . .

He couldn't. Why, by all that was holy, had the woman chosen the only safe patch of ground on the mountain to sleep? No rattlesnake or spider would bother her there. The evil in the woods wouldn't touch her, but it sure the hell knew she was present.

"Back off, Aaron," he told himself, even as he took a step forward. "You know she has to be a Lucy. You don't mess with Lucys," he reminded himself. "They cling like limpets."

But it was his self-imposed duty to keep Hillvale safe from the evil lurking in these hills, and this sleeping princess was agitating the spirits.

Of course, he could just be crazy, but that was part of the territory.

He would just touch the backpack, then decide whether it was safe to leave her there. He'd mastered the nuances of psychometry—the ability to read the past on objects—better than he had human nature.

The army-green canvas was old and tattered. The memories on it might go deep. Summoning his concentration, he let his right hand hover over the backpack. Detecting nothing dangerous, he skimmed his fingertips over the surface—

And conjured a faint vision of someone weeping as she added an old diary and a fountain pen to the empty bag.

The fairy-woman on the ground abruptly sat up and stared at him. Her eyes were the color of the forest in autumn, a honey gold like the hair nearly falling into them, only darker. Framed by long dark lashes and round cheeks, her eyes were nearly oblong, more so as she narrowed them.

"Not you again," she cried. "Not while I'm dying!"



As abruptly as she'd woken, she lay down and fell back to sleep.

Dying? Stunned, Aaron backed away. "Not again," he muttered, unconsciously repeating her warning. "Not ever again." He'd barely survived the last time.

Standing to his full height, he marched in the direction of the road. Not his problem, he told himself sternly. She was perfectly safe where she was.

Upon reaching the gravel road to civilization, he discovered Cassandra waiting for him—of course. Cass never set foot on this ground unless it was an emergency. Faex, shit—the Latin curse was as familiar to him as the English.

Silver-haired, slim, and erect as any professional model, the omniscient witch waited for him to speak first—even though she had to be here because she knew something he didn't.

Angry at himself, angry at the sleeping woman for sucking him in like that, he stopped only to announce, "She's one of yours. Keep her away from me."

Not waiting to hear Cass's warnings, Aaron whacked his stick against the hard ground and increased his stride toward town.



"WAKE UP, CHILD, IT'S LATE AND THE AIR IS COOLING. YOU'LL CATCH pneumonia or lure predators."

A hand shook Hannah's shoulder. Stretching, slowly awakening from what felt like the first good sleep she'd had in years, Hannah let peace fill her before responding.

Had she dreamed the striking man in black with the sexy goatee? Of course she had. Ever since she'd encountered the painting in Keegan's castle, she'd been dreaming of a tall dark knight with a neat chin beard. In this past year, the dreams had

become so insistent that she'd been forced to question her sanity. Eventually, those dreams, and the fainting spells that ensued, had caused her to seek medical assistance.

Perhaps if she'd heeded the warning of the painting sooner—but it was too late now.

She rubbed her eyes and sat up. The sun was gone from the clearing. The pine shadows were long. She'd slept the hours away instead of calling Keegan! What was wrong with her?

Frowning down at her was a fairy godmother, or a woman quite magical to behold, at least.

"Sorry, am I trespassing?" she asked, scrambling to pull on the jacket she'd worn on the plane. The woman watching her wore a sleeveless linen ankle-length dress—maybe she was a druid emerging from the pines.

"You're not trespassing if you're a guest of the lodge. But we have mountain lions and rattlesnakes here. You're better off sleeping in your bed."

Apparently, fairy godmothers sounded like every disapproving school teacher she'd ever had.

Hannah stood and folded her blanket. "I didn't mean to sleep so long. I'd only meant to take a quick look at my new home. I'm jet-lagged, and this place is so peaceful. Sorry if I worried you. Thank you for warning me. I'll be fine. I'm pretty sure I know how to get back."

"You're not fine," she said severely. "I'm Cassandra Tolliver. I assume you're the librarian Keegan said would be visiting."

Ah, small town, right. She knew how that worked. "Librarian, historian, teacher, jack of all trades." Hannah shoved the blanket into her backpack and started toward the path she remembered following. "Good to meet you, Mrs. Tolliver. I'm Hannah Simon."

She didn't intend to follow up that line about not being fine.

Hannah knew she wasn't fine. From communication with her Cousin Keegan and his wife, Mariah, Hannah knew the old lady was the self-appointed leader of the prescient Lucys. Lucys didn't really know anything more than she did, which was next to nothing. They just made educated guesses, as she did.

"People here call me Cass. Keegan said you might be interested in teaching in the school we're starting." Cass strode with a long-legged confidence that belied her silver-haired status.

"Or perhaps I could help setting up your history museum. I'm not sure I can teach a one-room school."

Cassandra nodded. "Thanks to several wealthy donors, our school will be better equipped than you're thinking. We'll have computers connected to teachers from around the state. We've hired an elementary grade teacher. As of now, you'd only have one student above that level."

"Wow. The mind boggles." Hannah hesitated, not eager to explain her predicament. She might have a year or ten years. She had to support herself while she searched for the painting that might hold clues to a cure. A museum director just sounded nicely isolated and less emotionally involved.

She really didn't want to fall down dead in front of little kids.

"You have time to think about it," Cassandra said, as if reading her mind, which she might very well be doing. "I trust the Kennedys are offering you a decent rental rate to encourage you to stay?"

"I just got in today. I've not talked to anyone but the desk clerk, not even Keegan. I didn't know if Mariah had her baby yet. I was supposed to call." She checked her watch but it was still on UK time.

"We're still anxiously awaiting the first child born here in over thirty years. Give them a call once you reach your room. It's



early yet.” Cassandra stopped outside the timber lodge where it appeared a limo was disgorging a bridal party. Women in gauzy gowns laughed and clung to wilting bouquets. Undisturbed by the clamor, Cass continued, “I’ll leave you here. Call on me anytime. Everyone knows where I live.”

Hannah held out her hand to shake Cass’s. “Thank you. I appreciate that. I hope I’ll be able to stay in Hillvale.” If she didn’t find the painting, couldn’t find a cure, she didn’t know how to plan a nonexistent future.

A shadow stepped down from the enormous lodge veranda. “What the hell are you doing on my property, you old witch? Didn’t I make it clear I’d have you arrested if you came near what’s mine?”

Even the noisy wedding party hesitated at the angry cry.

“Oh dear,” Cassandra said with a sigh, dropping Hannah’s hand. “No good deed goes unpunished.”

Hannah watched in puzzlement as a lovely, tawny-haired woman dressed in bronze and gold stepped into the light beyond the aging stone porch. She looked like a sun goddess—and screeched like an owl.

The goddess glared at Hannah. “You, whoever you are, take your trash and leave with her. I’ll not have more of your kind polluting my property.”

Having utterly no clue what kind she was—mutt?—Hannah felt more embarrassed for the screecher than for herself. The bridal party hurried for the open doors to escape the unpleasant scene.

“Me?” Hannah pointed at herself. “I’m a paying guest here. You don’t want guests?”

“It’s only partly her property, dear. She can’t throw you out. Carmel, may I introduce you to our new teacher, Hannah Simon? I don’t believe your sons would appreciate you throwing her out,

not if they expect to raise children here.”

Hannah refrained from mentioning that she hadn’t agreed to teaching yet. Cass had apparently spoken the magic words to stop the squawking. The golden lady stiffened, and her mouth worked, but nothing emerged. Cool.

“Carmel has been ill, dear, and it appears she’s off her medications again.” Cass took Hannah’s arm and strolled toward an open air shuttle waiting in the drive. “She could make life unpleasant for you if you stay at the lodge. Why don’t we explore alternatives?”

“All our properties are taken!” Carmel shouted as they turned their backs on her.

Keegan had said Hillvale was weird. He hadn’t mentioned how weird.

“What kind am I?” she whispered out of curiosity, climbing in the cart with her companion. “Is she a racist?” Hannah’s distant Asian heritage wasn’t overtly evident, but racists might note the shape of her eyes and conclude she wasn’t like them.

“You’re a Lucy, dear. Carmel is a witchist, if I may coin a word.”

“She can tell I’m a Malcolm librarian?” Hannah had grown up knowing she was a Malcolm—or a Lucy as Hillvale called the psychically endowed. Her talent was a minor one for finding family journals and categorizing them, not exactly a gift that was obvious to anyone except herself.

“I think Carmel simply associates anyone with me as not her kind—unless. . .” Cass pursed her lips and fell into a study.

Just as Hannah thought she wouldn’t hear the rest of that speculation, the older woman shrugged and completed her sentence.

“Unless the evil in her recognizes the good in you. I’d rather hope she’s not possessed by demons. Here we are. Let’s talk to

Aaron, shall we? He has a spare room.”

Demons? That was the first Hannah had heard of demons.

Cass climbed off the shuttle in front of an antique store displaying a splendidly ornamental medieval cuirass—just like the one the knight wore in Hannah’s dream.

In shock, she couldn’t flee but only stare.



## TWO



AT THE RINGING CHIME OVER THE SHOP DOOR, AARON DIDN'T LOOK UP FROM the clock he was repairing. He knew who had entered. Cassandra managed to emanate disapproval and anger without speaking. The odd. . . serenity. . . entering with her could only be the new Lucy. Both women created recognizable vibrations.

Gritting his teeth, he continued tinkering. "No," he said before Cass could phrase the question. "I'm using the room for storage. Let her sleep at your place."

"Josh is still using my apartment for his studio. Amber may not be happy if Hannah moves in with him. Amber needs security right now as she rebuilds her career, and having the schoolteacher living in her husband's office isn't conducive to that."

Using delicate tweezers, Aaron twisted the pin into a gear. "Then she can stay at the lodge until she finds a place."

Schoolteacher! Of course the new Lucy was a schoolteacher—innocent, childlike, everything he was not and never would be. Given her lack of negative vibrations, she was probably a guardian angel or some weirdness like that. The Lucys had a never-ending supply of talents.

"Since it seems Carmel is off her medication and has taken a dislike to Miss Simon, that might not be the wisest choice,"

Cassandra said patiently. "Let us have the key to the spare room, and we'll move boxes. It's not as if she arrived with a house full of furniture."

"Excuse me." A firm voice that did not sound particularly angelic spoke up. "I'm not a dog bone. I come from a long line of warriors and druids and know how to speak for myself. I'll be fine at the lodge until I decide if I'm staying in Hillvale. I just wanted to visit my cousin, give him news of his home, and meet Mariah in person."

Rolling his eyes, Aaron set down his tools and stood to lean over his counter. Damned if the woodland fairy wasn't even more enchanting awake than asleep. She'd donned an atrocious camouflage jacket over her bright pink shirt. Her khaki pants were wrinkled and grass-stained. But her honey hair framed a delicate chin and porcelain features, and her heavy-lidded eyes were much too discerning beneath the messy bangs.

"You're a Lucy. Of course you'll be staying. Cass has a house large enough to hide an army. She doesn't like sharing any more than Carmel does. Play the two old witches against each other, and they'll find you a place soon enough." Aaron turned his glare on Cass. "I am not one of your minions to be played like a chess piece."

"I don't go where I'm not wanted, but at least I'm a paying guest at the lodge. I'll be fine there." The teacher stalked out, defying Cass and scorning Aaron.

He was good with that.

Cass glared. "No man is an island. You cannot live like this forever." She marched out after her newest protégée.

Oh yeah, he could live like this forever and eternity. He was happy like this, with no one demanding his time and attention and devotion. He'd made himself a damned wealthy man now that his time was his own.

The phone rang as the women walked out. Expecting a call from a supplier, he grabbed it.

“The baby’s coming,” Keegan growled into his ear. “Word is that Cass has my cousin at your place. Send them up.” The call abruptly shut off.

The Scot geologist was a sound man and a good friend who generally left Aaron alone, as he liked it. Aaron couldn’t return the favor by ignoring the plea of a panicked new father.

Crossing the crowded shop in a few strides, Aaron shouted out the door at the women walking away. “Baby’s coming. Command performance.”

Cass turned with a regal nod of acknowledgement. Miss Simon pretended he didn’t exist. Being ignored by the newcomer might almost work—if he didn’t have to hear the faint lilt of home in her voice.



HANNAH’S INSIDES WERE IN SUCH KNOTS THAT SHE’D FEAR THE SICKNESS was in her gut and not her head if she hadn’t just undergone a complete physical—

And recognized the reason the antiques dealer and criminal fraud churned her insides. Tall, lean, exuding muscular strength and assurance, the man had near-black hair, a neat goatee, a Roman nose, and a mellow baritone to melt her bones—the modern equivalent of the knight in the painting and in her dreams, despite the expensive blazer and designer knit shirt. A modern knight—with a medieval cuirass in his window.

A normal person would simply assume she’d seen him before—he had the faint accent of the Shetlands, a place of few inhabitants. Her American parents had lived there when she was quite young. She supposed it was logical to believe the



familiarity was because she'd met him as a child.

But she wasn't normal or logical. She was a Malcolm—and she'd been studying Malcolm texts since birth. Weird coincidences *dinnae* happen, as the old stories told. Besides, he would have been a child, too, when she'd last been in the Shetlands, and no child would sport a goatee. Could the knot in her brain conjure coincidence?

How had her dream knight become twisted together with a criminal who had gone to prison for selling fraudulent art? She'd come here looking for Aaron Townsend, the conman who had stolen the painting the journals had spoken about. Now that she'd found him—she needed to treat him with extreme wariness and not like a dream knight.

Lost in thought, Hannah instinctively followed Cass down the street. She looked up now to see if they were heading for a hospital or a bus to take them to wherever Mariah was giving birth.

Instead, they were hurrying down Hillvale's main street, picking up a procession of chattering, excited followers. As they passed the café, a slight woman in an overlarge apron waved and closed the shutters over the café's window. She leaned out the door to call, "I'll be right there. Let me take the baby cakes out of the oven."

"Baby cakes," a short, heavy woman with glorious sunset hair repeated with a laugh. "Mariah would ask if she's baking babies now."

"They're like biscuits, aren't they?" Hannah asked. "Hi, I'm Hannah Simon, Keegan's cousin, and I have no idea what's happening."

"Amber Gabriel née Abercrombie. The name is still new to me." She flashed an amber wedding band set with pearls and diamonds. "And we're holding a birthing circle, I believe. Cass

told us about it, although I've never attended one."

"A birthing circle? It's a Malcolm tradition." Thrilled to have arrived in time for the birth of her newest cousin, comfortable with the role of historian and teacher, Hannah fell in stride with her friendly companion. "We call on the spirits of our ancestors to look after the mother and the spirit taking residence in the unborn child. Traditionally, it was done in ancient Malcolm castles—there's a whole story behind how we lost our original home. But we're so widespread now, that tradition has become what we make of it. I'm fascinated to learn how Hillvale does it."

"Oh, you're the new teacher!" Amber chirruped in joy. "My nephew will love you. And Teddy's sister has just moved in with her two little ones, although you won't have them for a few more years. It's just so exciting to see the town grow like this. Welcome."

"Mariah told me there was a museum director's position?" Hannah asked, sticking to her goal as the growing procession of women walked up a narrow lane of cottages nearly hidden by lush, exotic foliage. After her parents returned home from the UK, she'd grown up in the San Francisco area where most of her family resided. She'd returned to Scotland to work in Keegan's castle these last years, but it was good to be back in California again, she thought.

Amber waved plump fingers adorned with rings. "I think the director's job will mostly be a volunteer position until we start collecting actual artifacts besides what we find in our attics. Your expertise will be welcome, but it's the school that's vital."

Hannah wasn't the type to waste energy on curses, but she considered a few expressive epithets. Then the procession turned up the drive of a small house eccentrically adorned with what appeared to be silvery computer disks hanging from the eaves, twinkling in the fading rays of sun, and she let the future

go in favor of the present. A birthing circle, for her cousin's first child!

A tall woman with a head of platinum dandelion-fluff hair, who appeared to be in the first stages of pregnancy, joined them. "This is so exciting! Hi, I'm Samantha Walker. You must be the new teacher. Mariah usually helps Cass lead our ceremonies. She's the strongest among us, but she's otherwise occupied today," she added with a laugh. "I hope you know the ceremony."

So, it looked as if she was the new teacher—if she found a room. Keegan was right, though. Hannah thought she'd like it here. Arriving in time to sing a welcoming song for her new cousin seemed an auspicious opening for this last stage of her life.

"Hannah, if you'll start the chant, I think it will help connect the child to Keegan's heritage. I'm closer to Mariah's," Cass commanded.

The older cousin she knew and respected had been talking more than usual if strangers were acquainted with her background. She supposed new fathers could be excused for seeking aid. "We don't usually form a circle until the child is about to arrive. Is the midwife here?"

"Brenda's been in there since before noon," an auburn-haired woman called from the other side of the circle. "Mariah's sending out pretty strong signals now."

The only signals Hannah picked up were from books, but she knew many of her ancestors and their descendants had psychic abilities far greater than hers. "A twilight birth is special," she exclaimed, understanding the growing excitement. "Is Brenda a physician?" she asked Amber as they joined hands.

"A nurse practitioner and healer. Mariah said the child wants to be born here, not down the mountain in a hospital. I'm a little

terrified at the idea of being dictated to by an unborn child,” Amber said with a half-laugh. “I want drugs.”

“Not modern drugs,” Hannah warned. “They’re not good for those with psychic abilities. Modern medicine might be responsible for diluting our numbers and talents over the years. It’s not possible to prove that, though. Genetic failure for marrying outside our ancestral boundaries could also explain it.”

“Hannah!” Cass said sharply. “Mariah needs us.”

Unused to group participation, Hannah had to remember she wasn’t sitting in her lonely library. She’d never led a chant either, but the words were in her head, just as the many texts in the library lurked there, ready to be called upon as needed.

Clasping the hands of Amber and Samantha, with the sun’s final rays fading behind the trees, Hannah spoke the ancient words asking for the blessings of mother earth and the ancestors who came before, asking for protection for the new child and her mother. She started in the old tongue of her druidic forebears, proceeded into the Gaelic of Keegan’s family, added the Mandarin of her maternal family, and worked her way to English.

An older gentleman with a long, graying braid kept time on a leather and wood drum, chanting in an unfamiliar tongue similar to the one Cass took up now. Hannah assumed the language belonged to Mariah’s Native American ancestors. They both followed up with Spanish. A tall black woman Hannah hadn’t met added an African and a Jamaican blessing. In repetition, the chants blended, droning through the night air after the sun descended, welcoming the spirit child from wherever it came.

Once upon a time, birthing circles had been held in castle keeps with extended family present, Hannah knew. Here, where tiny cottages replaced towering halls, and far-flung families couldn’t unite, this coming together of many hereditary lines

offered a similar security. Even though these women were strangers, the warmth and excitement of bringing new life into the world connected them to each other and beyond the veil of the spirit world. Hannah could almost feel their long-gone ancestors gathering.

With the sun vanished below the horizon, the squall of a newborn cut through the drone of their chant. A clear soprano broke into joyous song. Hannah located the refrain coming from a tall woman, clad in black and wearing a veil, whom she had noticed earlier. Recognizing the song, she joined in, as did Cass and several of the others.

The babe's cries quieted. The front door opened, letting out a slash of golden light, before Keegan, a giant of a man, blocked the glow with broad shoulders while holding a swaddled infant. "A girl, meet Daphne Daisy Ives, nine pounds, ten ounces. Mariah is doing fine, thank you all."

A cheer echoed through the dark.

"Daisy!" Samantha whispered excitedly. "Mariah thought she felt Daisy's spirit. I guess we won't know until Daphne's old enough to show if she has a creative talent."

"Look at Daisy's lamassu," Amber whispered back, pointing out the absurd little stacks of wired stones scattered about the yard. "Their eyes are glowing."

The crystals attached to the top stones did seem to be catching the lamplight. "What does that mean?" Hannah asked. She'd learned about Hillvale's inhabitants and their abilities from Keegan and Mariah's communications, but she wanted to absorb her surroundings through all eyes.

"Daisy was one of the original Hillvale commune artists. She was Mariah's mentor and created those sculptures to protect us against evil. She was murdered last year, and Mariah misses her. So she could just be engaged in wishful thinking, but Daisy's

spirit could be present!” Amber said in excitement.

Even Hannah felt a little thrill at thinking the text in the old journals hadn’t lied about the spirits of ancestors entering the womb. Surrounded by all this estrogen, she was sorry that she would never experience the initiation of new life. But she wouldn’t leave any child of hers motherless, and so would never know this thrill for herself. Her excitement was for the women around her.

She would not think of dark knights making babies. That was the knot in her brain talking.

After the little cook handed out her soft, sugary cookies, the circle broke up, with people drifting in different directions. Most of the women appeared to live on this enchanting lane and drifted to their cottages, one by one. By the time she traipsed into town, Hannah was alone except for the auburn-haired woman she’d heard called Teddy.

“You’ll fit right in here,” Teddy said happily. “I don’t know that my niece and nephew have any gifts, they’re still young, but a gifted teacher can only be a benefit. Keegan says you carry a library in your head. Oh, and hi, I’m Teddy Kennedy. I own that jewelry store.” She nodded at a building on the corner of the main street and the highway.

Hannah introduced herself and wondered if the lodge shuttle ran after dark.

“Don’t worry,” Teddy said, as if reading her mind. “Harvey can take you back to the lodge in the golf cart if the shuttle has quit running. Since we closed town early for the birthing, it probably has. Oops.”

“Ah, you’re the empath Keegan mentioned.” Hannah studied the dark town lit only by a single light pole. “Who is Harvey? Is he the musician?”

“Among other things. He’s a Lucy, too, although he and



Aaron and Keegan hate being called Lucys.”

“Understandably,” Hannah said with a laugh. “Keegan is more Ives than Malcolm, so he hates being called a Malcolm too, since most of us are female.”

“You sound too American to be Scots, although I know you just came from Keegan’s home. Have you lived here before?” The auburn-haired jeweler stood with Hannah beneath the street lamp, apparently confident that a ride would magically appear.

“I was born in the Shetlands, but my parents returned to their families in San Francisco when I was little. So I went to school in California, completed university courses in the UK, and felt called to help Keegan with his library and their local school after that.” Hannah was glad that her family wasn’t the type to hover. She’d always been a loner, and they accepted that. She could visit occasionally and hope they wouldn’t notice any changes.

“I should travel more,” Teddy said. “But I’m always too busy. Huh, that’s Aaron’s van coming down the street. I wonder where Harvey is?”

“Maybe he’s driving the van,” Hannah said with hope, not wanting to face the angry man with a criminal past after the beautiful evening. “Aaron doesn’t like me.”

“Aaron avoids everyone. He’s very good at closing himself off so even I can’t tell what he’s feeling. But once he gets involved, he’s passionate about pursuing what’s right. Ask Fee sometime. You’re safe in his hands.”

Hannah was having difficulty processing all the names and people, but she believed Fee was the cook who had passed around baby cakes. She didn’t have time to question before the van halted and the passenger door opened. The light inside only revealed the shadow of the driver against the darkened windows.

“There could be a serial killer in there,” she said weakly.

“Nah, only Aaron would open the door without speaking. Stop

by my store any time. I'm always eager for a coffee break and a chat." Teddy walked off with a wave.

Reluctantly, Hannah climbed into the passenger seat. Her dark knight with the criminal past grimly gripped the steering wheel.

"They had a baby girl," she said, trying not to sound frightened. "Daphne Daisy they're calling her."

"Am I picking up your luggage and delivering you anywhere?" he asked without comment on the happy news.

"I'll be fine at the lodge. Keegan wouldn't have recommended it if it was unsafe," she said with an assurance she wasn't certain she felt. The roaring lioness had been pretty unbalanced.

"I'll go in with you. If Carmel has another fit, I'll take you to Walker's place. They have a spare room. Samantha just fills it with seedlings and crap." He drove the large van up the narrow lodge drive with the expertise of a knight on his steed.

She had to stop thinking like that. Noble knights didn't go to jail for selling fake art.

It wasn't dreadfully late. The lodge parking lot was filled with cars, and people strolled the walks and spilled from the well-lit restaurant and bar.

"I appreciate the ride, but I'll be fine," Hannah assured him. "If you let me out here, you won't have to find a parking space. I can go in the back door without notice."

Ignoring her, he drove around to the rear of the lodge and parked. He climbed out, came around, and held out his hand to help her before she could step down on her own.

The minute Aaron's palm closed over Hannah's, she knew her mistake.

### THREE



AARON CLUTCHED THE THRICE-DAMNED WOMAN'S FINGERS AS SHE crumpled.

"Deodamnatus," he muttered in his schoolboy Latin, catching the teacher's other arm to prevent her from hitting the pavement. She slumped against him like a rag doll. "Faex." Now what did he do?

Cell phones didn't work in Hillvale, or he'd call the lodge desk for help. "Futue deodamnatus faex." He despised helplessness—and he was damned scared she'd die on him.

He heaved her unconscious form back in the van so he could rummage through her backpack for the room key.

The instant he released her, she stirred.

"That was awkward," she muttered, eyes still closed against the dim interior light of the van.

"Tell me about it," he retorted, relieved beyond measure that she was still alive. "Or better yet, don't. Just find your key so I can see you inside, where you need to call a doctor or I will."

"They can't do anything. Just don't touch me, and I'll be fine." She opened her eyes but wouldn't look at him.

Anger followed terror. "Seems to me you say that a lot—I'll be fine—when you obviously aren't," he said in disgust. "Give me your backpack. Can you climb down without my help?"

She handed him the heavy pack and rewarded him with a look of scorn.

The look did his jaded heart good. Scorn he could handle.

He stood back and let her use the door as crutch to climb down again.

She tried to retrieve the backpack, but he shouldered it. "I'm seeing you to your door. If you want to collapse and die once you're inside, that's on you."

He didn't ask if she only fainted on him or if she made a practice of it. She'd said she'd seen doctors. He didn't want to know anything more personal or intimate than that. But for a very brief moment there, his damned psychometry had kicked in and he'd seen. . . something. He'd trained himself to block any impressions he didn't want, or shaking hands could raise some really ugly, and occasionally lewd, mental pictures. He didn't know how she'd broken through his block even for that brief second.

But she'd left him wondering if the Malcolm librarian had the gift of psychometry too. That could be awkward if she started poking around his store. Because, yeah, he'd figured out that this was the librarian Keegan had brought to Hillvale, curse the damned geologist's generous heart.

"I'm not usually given to collapsing," she said tartly, marching down the dark sidewalk at the rear of the lodge. "But then, I don't normally meet men with the gift of psychometry either. I'm receptive. I can be affected by psychic gifts but cannot reflect or employ them."

"Good to know," he said curtly, relieved that his touch hadn't set off a brain bomb. Then he processed the sentence beyond himself and scowled. "There are people who can reflect or employ my gift if I touch them?"

And how the hell would that work? They saw what he did

when he touched an object? Or they could see what was inside his head? That gave him mental shudders.

“It’s been reported, yes, but passive agents tend to be villains and not journal writers, so I have no firsthand reports, just observations from ancestors.” She entered the brightly lit hall of hotel rooms and stalked down the carpet.

His need for knowledge warred with his desire to avoid a woman who represented everything he never wanted in his life again.

She unlocked her door and Aaron held it open so he could throw her backpack in. Before he could think better of it, he asked, “If I buy you a drink, will you tell me more of these villains?”

She hesitated, casting him a wary look, before shaking her head. “No, I think not. Thank you for the ride. Good night.” She took the door and waited for him to leave.

Perversely, he didn’t want to be denied. “As librarian, aren’t you supposed to offer us any information to be found in our ancestors’ journals?”

“Give me your card with your email address, and I’ll send you the volumes and pages referencing the villainy. It’s obscure and not very helpful.” Stone-faced, she continued to wait for him to back off from the door he held open.

Grumpily, he produced a slim mahogany card case from his jacket and handed her the cream-colored card for his store. “I’d appreciate that.”

He stalked off, leaving the obstinate female to her brain fits. Deciding he’d check the bar for more congenial company, he headed into the interior. Since Hillvale had started hosting weddings in the garden Samantha had created at the vortex, the lodge often accommodated loud bachelor and bachelorette parties. It sounded as if one occupied the bar now.

The Kennedy brothers waved him over from one of the more private booths. As partial owners of the corporation controlling the lodge and most of the rental property in Hillvale, the Kennedys had privileges that allowed them to claim prime real estate in the dark, heavily masculine tavern. The low roar dimmed considerably in this sheltered corner.

“The babe was safely delivered. You can go home now,” Aaron said wryly as he slid into the booth. Their wives had been part of the birthing circle. Well, Fee and Monty weren’t married yet, but the little cook wore the mayor’s ring. Close enough.

“We’ve been warned,” Kurt Kennedy acknowledged. The taller, darker, more lean of the two brothers, he sipped his drink with an air of resignation. “Once one of the women has a kid, they all want one. Samantha was a natural, of course. She grows things, so growing babies was the next step. Walker is on board with that.”

“But Kurt and I are still knee-deep in debt and not ready for baby formula and diapers,” Monty said morosely. His muscled bulk reflected the football career he’d abandoned to step in as mayor of the deteriorating town the Kennedys owned. “We’ll have to build a hospital just to handle the population explosion.”

“Our resident nurse wants an urgent care center.” Aaron ordered a beer and sat back, relaxing. The Kennedys weren’t Lucys, just mortal men with mundane problems. “Can your Hollywood director swing for some fancy equipment? The Lucys won’t willingly go down the mountain to a real hospital.”

Kurt nodded. “We’ve planned one for the shopping area of the new development. But these things take time. We’ll have to set one up in one of the empty buildings in town, which means complete rewiring and plumbing.”

“Fee was hoping to expand the café into the building next door, but that’s the most convenient one for an urgent care



center. The others are long and narrow or two stories.” Monty’s gloom didn’t lift.

Their problems weren’t his. Aaron sipped the beer the waiter delivered, then cautiously delved into the newcomer. “Where are you putting the school now that the new teacher has arrived?”

“We can use one of the two story buildings for the school, no problem. We thought the old place next to the ice cream shop would be good until the new school is built. We’ll have to run cable and stronger electric boxes for the computers, but there aren’t enough kids for the plumbing to be a problem yet.” Kurt sketched idly on a napkin. “We’ll need to talk to the teachers, but it seems logical to put the young ones downstairs and the older students upstairs for now.”

“You’ll need to find a place for the new teacher,” Aaron warned. “Your mother has taken an instant dislike to her. I understand there was an altercation involving Cass earlier.”

In identical gestures, both Kennedys ran their hands through their hair and rubbed their temples. That was their usual reaction to their mother’s volatile behavior.

“Her docs won’t talk to us,” Kurt explained. “After Fee forced her into the hospital, Mom claimed the doctors found lumps. But she checked out and went to our condo in Hawaii. If she had any medical procedures done while she was there, we don’t know about it.”

“Personally, I think the lumps are in her head,” Monty growled. “But we’d have to go to court to claim her incompetent so we can take control of the corporation and obtain power of attorney to talk to her doctors. How do you do that to your mother?”

Aaron shrugged. “Mine’s long dead, so I wouldn’t know. What does Fiona say? She’s the one diagnosing her as ill.”

“Fee says she smells decay, which isn’t exactly useful. I

swear, Lucys make life more difficult,” Monty complained. “They can point out something wrong but can’t fix it.”

Aaron refrained from mentioning that he was one of the Lucys. The Kennedys knew, but he generally didn’t discuss his psychometric knowledge. “That’s why we have the librarian. Fee needs to ask our newcomer if there have ever been any references in the journals to smells of decay. Hannah will be able to refer her to the right books. Whether or not they’ve been scanned and are accessible may be another problem.”

“Thanks. Fee knows nothing of her heritage, so it’s good for her to have a cookbook of sorts to follow instead of relying entirely on her own observations. I wish I knew a property convenient for our new teacher, but the cottages are all booked through most of the year. I guess we can offer a discount on her room at the lodge—or include it as part of her salary.” Monty pulled out a notebook to jot down the thought.

“That won’t solve the problem if your mother doesn’t want her here,” Aaron warned. “You’ll have to tell Cass to open her doors for a change.” He finished his beer and stood up.

“Have you ever been inside Cass’s place?” Kurt asked with a wry intonation. “You do not want to send our new teacher into a different dimension.”

There was that, Aaron supposed, but he wasn’t interested in Cass and her machinations, not any more than he was interested in Carmel and her brain rot. He simply did not want the new teacher moving into the empty room above his shop. “You don’t want her polluted with evil, either,” he warned. “We found her wandering in your woods earlier. She apparently doesn’t have the Lucy ability to sense evil.”

He walked away before the Kennedys protested. As Nulls, they simply didn’t understand—or believe—in the spiritual. They’d accept the danger of lions, bears, and snakes as well as

landslides, earthquakes, and sinkholes to which the area was susceptible. They might even believe the ground was chemically polluted. They would not believe in the blood of innocents or souls of evil polluting dirt.

Aaron did. He'd felt the grip of malum before.

He'd better do a quick patrol of the lodge, just to be certain the new teacher was safe.



HANNAH TOOK A HOT SHOWER AND TRIED TO SCRUB AWAY THE INTERPOSED images of dark knight and sophisticated crook twisting in her deformed synapses. Just touching Aaron's palm had nearly allowed her to slip away again. The doctors hadn't been able to explain the brain lapses. She knew of nothing in Malcolm journals that fit them. She simply had to accept that the inoperable mass in her head was creating hallucinations.

How could she teach when she never knew if she'd have another fit?

Which was why she needed to find the painting showing the Healing Stone—the artwork Aaron had stolen and presumably sold to some unidentified customer, if he hadn't kept it for himself.

She wrapped her hair in a towel and, wearing a hotel bathrobe, padded out to the tiny desk beside her bed where she'd set up her laptop. She should let her family know that she'd arrived safely. She didn't know if she was strong enough to face a huge family gathering, so she'd just have to let them think she was buried in work setting up the new school. Not that she had a clue as to how to start a school, but she ought to be able to manage a classroom of one.

After sending emails, she remembered Aaron's card. She

looked up his website—it rivaled anything she’d ever seen in the UK, where priceless antiques cluttered warehouses across the countryside. Judging by the images he seemed to specialize in furniture and paintings, although from what she’d seen of his cluttered shop, he had a lot more than that. He was definitely no flea market dealer. If they were genuine, the value on some of these pieces. . . would buy a mansion or three, even in California, where real estate was ridiculous. Of course, he’d have to sell them first, so cash flow might be a problem , hence the art fraud. That had been years ago.

She entered the Malcolm website she and Mariah had been working on, looked up the passages she’d promised, and sent him the links. Mariah’s generous gift of an expensive scanning machine had made Hannah’s job immensely easier. Keegan’s hiring of an expert to scan the delicate older books had given her freedom. With a solid understanding of the library, she no longer needed the actual volumes—but she needed to do something.

She’d loved hiking in the wide-open spaces of Scotland, away from the pressures of family and expectations. She’d always wanted to be a librarian and teacher, not the university professor her family had expected. She was good with that. Fine, she added defiantly, remembering Aaron’s contempt.

Completing her correspondence and still feeling restless, she debated whether she could sleep after spending half the day napping. She needed to adjust to the time change somehow. Maybe she could use the pool.

She stuck a clasp in her damp hair, pulled on her bathing suit, and covered it with a sarong and loose knit top. Donning sandals, she slipped down the hall, following the direction of the signs. To her disappointment, a sign said the pool closed at ten, but she heard laughter emerging from behind the curtained windows. She peered through a slit between frame and cloth and

saw the voluptuous, sunset-haired, tarot reader climbing out of the water. With her was a movie-star handsome male who watched Amber with such obvious adoration that he had to be her new husband.

Hannah felt the pull of melancholy, probably brought on by the birthing earlier. She normally thrived on her lonely book life. She was too boring and plain to attract serious boyfriends. Her head had always been too full of duties to see if her occasional hook-ups could develop into more. And now it was too late for that as well—probably for the good of all.

Music played in the bar, so she turned in that direction. Perhaps she could ease into her new time zone gradually. As she walked through the sprawling lodge, she stopped to admire the ghostcatchers Mariah created. Hanging near the ceiling, the stringy nets dangling with crystals and feathers swung and spun even when there was no breeze. Mariah claimed they halted the poltergeists who haunted the area.

Hannah wasn't certain that ghosts were any better than loud wedding parties, but the one in the bar had mostly broken up and gone to their rooms by the time she arrived. A few well-dressed members of the group were getting snookered together. The music apparently came from loudspeakers. She didn't see any musicians. Oh well. She couldn't really expect a pub experience here.

She probably shouldn't tempt fate by wandering the halls where Carmel might see her. Maybe she should study on how to set up a school. She'd had too much stimulation for one evening anyway.

She turned away from the bar, took the corridor back to the lobby, and headed down the back hall to her room—where she heard loud voices raised in fury. Shoot. Maybe the walls of her room would block out the racket?

A woman's furious screech cut through the empty hall. Hannah panicked, freezing where she was. Another loud cry abruptly cut off. . . and then, silence.

Were those running footsteps?

She swung around and fled for the front desk. She'd recognized that ugly screech.

Carmel.

Hannah felt like a fool telling the desk clerk someone was being murdered. Carmel wasn't rational, she recalled, so she simply told the employee that she heard screams. The clerk started making calls. Clenching her fists, feeling helpless, Hannah watched as uniformed security raced from outside in response to the calls. An older, portly man in a business suit strode from a side hall, looking grim at the security rushing past. He nodded curtly at Hannah, then followed in their path. Several people who had entered the lobby from a side door seemed confused and lingered. A handsome younger man emerged from the bar, walking rapidly. Deciding he looked wealthy and worried enough to be Carmel's son and one of the lodge owners, Hannah followed.

Murder on her first night in town would not be auspicious.